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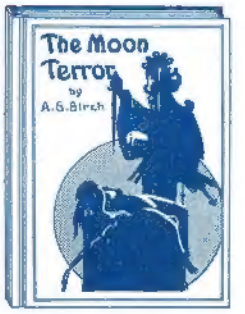

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Weird Tales

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A MAGAZINE of the BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XIII NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, $2.50 a year in the United States; $3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The BLACK MASTER

By SEABURY QUINN

"The terrible shape began to change before their eyes."

JULES DE GRANDIN poured a thimbleful of Boulogne cognac into a wide-mouthed glass and passed the goblet back and forth beneath his nose with a waving motion, inhaling the rich, fruity fumes from the amber fluid. "*Eh bien,* young *Monsieur,*" he informed our visitor as he drained the liqueur with a slow, appreciative swallow and set the empty glass on the tabouret with a scarcely suppressed smack of his lips, "this is of interest. Pirate treasure, you do say? *Parbleu—c'est presque irresistible.* Tell us more, if you please."

Eric Balderson looked from the little Frenchman to me with a half-diffident, deprecating smile. "There really isn't much to tell," he confessed, "and I'm not at all sure I'm not the victim of a pipe-dream, after all. You knew Father pretty well, didn't you, Dr. Trowbridge?" he turned appealingly to me.

"Yes," I answered, "he and I were at Amherst together. He was an extremely level-headed sort of chap, too, not at all given to daydreaming, and——"

"That's what I'm pinning my faith on," Eric broke in. "Coming from anyone but Dad the story would be too utterly fantastic to——"

"*Mordieu,* yes, *Monsieur,*" de Grandin interrupted testily. "We do

concede your so excellent *père* was the ultimate word in discretion and sound judgment, but will you, for the love of kindly heaven, have the goodness to tell us all and let us judge for ourselves the value of the communication of which you speak?''

Eric regarded him with the slow grin he inherited from his father, then continued, quite unruffled, ''Dad wasn't exactly what you'd call credulous, but he seemed to put considerable stock in the story, judging from his diary. Here it is.'' From the inside pocket of his dinner-coat he produced a small book bound in red leather and handed it to me. ''Read the passages I've marked, will you please, Doctor,'' he asked. ''I'm afraid I'd fill up if I tried to read Dad's writing aloud. He—he hasn't been gone very long, you know.''

Adjusting my pince-nez, I hitched a bit nearer the library lamp and looked over the age-yellowed sheets covered with the fine, angular script of my old classmate!

8 Nov. 1898—Old Robinson is going fast. When I called to see him at the Seaman's Snug Harbor this morning I found him considerably weaker than he had been yesterday, though still in full possession of his faculties. There's nothing specifically wrong with the old fellow, save as any worn-out bit of machinery in time gets ready for the scrap-heap. He will probably go out sometime during the night, quite likely in his sleep, a victim of having lived too long.

"Doctor," he said to me when I went into his room this morning, "ye've been mighty good to me, a poor, worn-out old hulk with never a cent to repay all yer kindness; but I've that here which will make yer everlastin' fortune, providin' ye're brave enough to tackle it."

"That's very kind of you, John," I answered, but the old fellow was deadly serious.

"'Tis no laughin' matter, Doctor," he returned as he saw me smile. "'Tis th' truth an' nothin' else I'm tellin' ye—I'd 'a' had a go at it meself if it warn't that seafarin' men don't hold with disturbin' th' bones o' th' dead. But you, bein' a landsman, an' a doctor to boot, would most likely succeed where others have failed. I had it from my gran'ther, sir, an' he was an old man an' I but a lad when he gave it me, so ye can see 'tis no new thing I'm passin' on. Where he got it I don't know, but he guarded it like his eyes an' would never talk about it, not even to me after he'd give it to me."

With that he asked me to go to his ditty-box and take out a packet done up in oiled silk, which he insisted I take as partial compensation for all I'd done for him.

I tried to tell him the home paid my fee regularly, and that he was beholden to me for nothing, but he would not have it; so, to quiet the old man, I took the plan for my "everlastin' fortune" before I left.

9 Nov. 1898—Old John died last night, as I'd predicted, and probably went with the satisfied feeling that he had made a potential millionaire of the struggling country practitioner who tended him in his last illness. I must look into the mysterious packet by which he set such store. Probably it's a chart for locating some long-sunk pirate ship or unburying the loot of Captain Kidd, Blackbeard, or some other old sea-robber. Sailormen a generation ago were full of such yarns, and recounted them so often they actually came to believe them.

10 Nov. '98—I was right in my surmise concerning old John's legacy, though it's rather different from the usual run of buried-treasure maps. Some day, when I've nothing else to do, I may go down to the old church in Harrisonville and actually have a try at the thing. It would be odd if poor Eric Balderson, struggling country practitioner, became a wealthy man overnight. What would I do first? Would a sealskin dolman for Astrid or a new side-bar buggy for me be the first purchase I'd make? I wonder.

''H'm,'' I remarked as I put down the book. ''And this old seaman's legacy, as your father called it——''

''Is here,'' Eric interrupted, handing me a square of ancient, crackling vellum on which a message of some kind had been laboriously scratched. The edges of the parchment were badly frayed, as though with much handling, though the indentures might have been the result of hasty tearing in the olden days. At any rate, it was a tattered and thoroughly decrepit sheet from which I read:

in yᵉ name of yᵉ most Holie Trinitie

I, Richard Thompson, being a right synfull manne and near unto mine ende do give greeting and warning to whoso shall

rede herefrom. Ye booty which my master whose name no manne did rightly know, but who was surnamed by some ye Black Master and by somme Blackface ye Merciless, lyes hydden in divers places, but ye creame thereof is laid away in ye churchyard of St. Davides hard by Harrisons village. There, by daye and by nite do ye dedde stand guard over it for ye Master sealed its hydinge place both with cement and with a curse which he fondlie sware should be on them & on their children who violated ye sepulchre without his sanction. Yet if any there be who dare defye ye curse (as I should not) of hym who had neither pitie ne mercie ne lovingkindness at all, let hm go unto ye burrieing ground at dedde of nite at ye season of dies natalis invicti & obey ye direction. Further hint I dast not gyvve, for fear of him who lurks beyant ye portales of lyffe to hold to account such of hys servants as preceded him not in dethe. And of your charity, ye who rede this, I do charge and conjure ye that ye make goode and pieous use of ye Master hys treasure and that ye expend such part of ye same as may be fyttinge for masses for ye good estate of Richard Thompson, a synnfull man dieing in terror of his many iniquities & of ye tongueless one who waites himme across ye borderline

When ye star shines from ye tree
Be it as a sign to ye.
Draw ye fourteen cubit line
To ye entrance unto lyfe
Whence across ye graveyard sod
See spotte cursed by man & God.

"IT LOOKS like a lot of childish nonsense to me," I remarked with an impatient shrug as I tossed the parchment to de Grandin. "Those old fellows who had keys to buried treasure were everlastingly taking such care to obscure their meaning in a lot of senseless balderdash that no one can tell when they're serious and when they're perpetrating a hoax. If——"

"*Cordieu,*" the little Frenchman whispered softly, examining the sheet of frayed vellum with wide eyes, holding it up to the lamplight, then crackling it softly between his fingers. "Is it possible? But yes, it must be —Jules de Grandin could not be mistaken."

"Whatever are you maundering about?" I interrupted impatiently. "The way you're looking at that parchment anyone would think——"

"Whatever anyone would think, he would be far from the truth," de Grandin cut in, regarding us with the fixed, unwinking stare which meant deadly seriousness. "If this plat be a *mauvaise plaisanterie*—how do you call it? the practical joke?—it is a very grim one indeed, for the parchment on which it is engraved is human skin."

"What?" cried Eric and I in chorus.

"Nothing less," de Grandin responded. "Me, I have seen such parchments in the Paris *musée*; I have handled them, I have touched them. I could not be mistaken. Such things were done in the olden days, my friends. I think, perhaps, we should do well to investigate this business. Men do not set down confessions of a sinful life and implore the possible finders of treasure to buy masses for their souls on human hide when they would indulge in pleasantries. No, it is not so."

"But——" I began, when he shut me off with a quick gesture.

"In the churchyard of Saint David's this repentant Monsieur Richard Thompson did say. May I inquire, Friend Trowbridge, if there be such a church in the neighborhood? Assuredly there was once, for does he not say, 'hard by Harrison's village,' and might that not have been the early designation of your present city of Harrisonville?"

"U'm—why, yes, by George!" I exclaimed. "You're right, de Grandin. There *is* a Saint David's church down in the old East End—a Colonial parish, too; one of the first English churches built after the British took Jersey over from the Dutch. Harrisonville was something of a seaport in those days, and there was a bad reef a few miles offshore. I've been told the church was built and endowed

with the funds derived from salvaging cargo from ships stranded on the reef. The parish dates back to 1670 or '71, I believe."

"H'm-m." De Grandin extracted a vile-smelling French cigarette from his black-leather case, applied a match to it and puffed furiously a moment, then slowly expelled a twin column of smoke from his nostrils. "And '*dies natalis invicti*' our so scholarly Monsieur Richard wrote as the time for visiting this churchyard. What can that be but the time of Bonhomme Noël—the Christmas season? *Parbleu,* my friends, I think, perhaps, we shall go to that churchyard and acquire a most excellent Christmas gift for ourselves. Tonight is December 22, tomorrow should be near enough for us to begin our quest. We meet here tomorrow night to try our fortune, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

Crazy and harebrained as the scheme sounded, both Eric and I were carried away by the little Frenchman's enthusiasm, and nodded vigorous agreement.

"*Bon,*" he cried, "*très bon!* One more drink, my friends, then let us go dream of the golden wheat awaiting our harvesting."

"But see here, Dr. de Grandin," Eric Balderson remarked, "since you've told us what this message is written on this business looks more serious to me. Suppose there's really something in this curse old Thompson speaks of? We won't be doing ourselves much service by ignoring it, will we?"

"Ah bah," returned the little Frenchman above the rim of his half-drained glass. "A curse, you do say. Young *Monsieur,* I can plainly perceive you do not know Jules de Grandin. A worm-eaten fig for the curse! Me, I can curse as hard and as violently as any villainous old sea-robber who ever sank a ship or slit a throat!"

2

THE bleak December wind which had been moaning like a disconsolate banshee all afternoon had brought its threatened freight of snow about 9 o'clock, and the factory and warehouse-lined thoroughfares of the unfashionable part of town where old Saint David's church stood were noiseless and white as ghost-streets in a dead city when de Grandin, Eric Balderson and I approached the churchyard pentice shortly before 12 the following night. The hurrying flakes had stopped before we left the house, however, and through the wind-driven pluvial clouds the chalk-white winter moon and a few stars shone frostily.

"*Cordieu,* I might have guessed as much!" de Grandin exclaimed in exasperation as he tried the iron grille stopping the entrance to the church's little close and turned away disgustedly. "Locked—locked fast as the gates of hell against escaping sinners, my friends," he announced. "It would seem we must swarm over the walls, and ——"

"And get a charge of buckshot in us when the caretaker sees us," Eric interrupted gloomily.

"No fear, *mon vieux,*" de Grandin returned with a quick grin. "Me, I have not been idle this day. I did come here to reconnoiter during the afternoon—*morbleu,* but I did affect the devotion at evensong before I stepped outside to survey the terrain! —and many things I discovered. First, this church stands like a lonely outpost in a land whence the expeditionary force has been withdrawn. Around here are not half a dozen families enrolled on the parish register. Were it not for churchly pride and the fact that heavy endowments of the past make it possible to support this chapel as a mission, it would have been closed long ago. There is no resident sexton, no *curé* in resi-

dence here. Both functionaries dwell some little distance away. As for the *cimetière,* no interments have been permitted here for close on fifty years. The danger of grave-robbers is *nil,* so also is the danger of our finding a night watchman. Come, let us mount the wall."

It was no difficult feat scaling the six-foot stone barricade surrounding Saint David's little God's Acre, and we were standing ankle-deep in fresh snow within five minutes, bending our heads against the howling midwinter blast and casting about for some starting-point in our search.

Sinking to his knees in the lee of an ancient holly tree, de Grandin drew out his pocket electric torch and scanned the copy of Richard Thompson's cryptic directions. "H'm," he murmured as he flattened the paper against the bare ground beneath the tree's outspread, spiked branches, "what is it the estimable Monsieur Thompson says in his so execrable poetry? 'When the star shines from the tree.' Name of three hundred demented green monkeys, when *does* a star shine from a tree, Friend Trowbridge?"

"Maybe he meant a Christmas tree," I responded with a weak attempt at flippancy, but the little Frenchman was quick to adopt the suggestion.

"*Morbleu,* I think you have right, good friend," he agreed with a nod. "And what tree is more in the spirit of Noël than the holly? Come, let us take inventory."

Slowly, bending his head against the wind, yet thrusting it upward from the fur collar of his greatcoat like a turtle emerging from its shell every few seconds, he proceeded to circle every holly and yew tree in the grounds, observing them first from one angle, then another, going so near that he stood within their shadows, then retreating till he could observe them without withdrawing his chin from his collar. At last:—

"*Nom d'un singe vert,* but I think I have it!" he ejaculated. "Come and see."

Joining him, we gazed upward along the line indicated by his pointing finger. There, like a glass ornament attached to the tip of a Yuletide tree, shone and winked a big, bright star—the planet Saturn.

"So far, thus good," he murmured, again consulting the cryptogram. "'Be it as a sign to ye,' says our good Friend Thompson. *Très bien, Monsieur,* we have heeded the sign—now for the summons.

"'Draw ye fourteen cubit line'—about two hundred and fifty-two of your English inches, or, let us say, twenty-one feet," he muttered. "Twenty-one feet, yes; but which way? 'To the entrance unto life.' U'm, what *is* the entrance to life in a burying-ground, *par le mort d'un chat noir?* A-a-ah? Perhaps yes; why not?"

As he glanced quickly this way and that, his eyes had come to rest on a slender stone column, perhaps three feet high, topped by a wide, bowl-like capital. Running through the snow to the monument, de Grandin brushed the clinging flakes from the bowl's lip and played the beam of his flashlight on it. "You see?" he asked with a delighted laugh.

Running in a circle about the weathered stone was the inscription:

SANCTVS, SANCTVS, SANCTVS
Vnleff a man be borne again of VVater & Ye Holy Spirit he fhall in nowife . . .

the rest of the lettering had withered away with the alternate frosts and thaws of more than two hundred winters.

"Why, of course!" I exclaimed with a nod of understanding. "A baptismal font—'the entrance unto life,' as old Thompson called it."

"My friend," de Grandin assured me solemnly, "there are times when I do not entirely despair of your intellect, but where shall we find that

much-cursed spot of which *monsieur*——"

"Look, look, for God's sake!" croaked Eric Balderson, grasping my arm in his powerful hand till I winced under the pressure. "Look there, Dr. Trowbridge—*it's opening!*"

The moon, momentarily released from a fetter of drifting clouds, shot her silver shafts down to the clutter of century-old monuments in the churchyard, and, twenty feet or so from us, stood one of the old-fashioned boxlike grave-markers of Colonial times. As we looked at it in compliance with Eric's panic-stricken announcement, I saw the stone panel nearest us slowly slide back like a shutter withdrawn by an invisible hand.

"Sa-ha, it lies this way, then?" de Grandin whispered fiercely, his small, white teeth fairly chattering with eagerness. "Let us go, my friends; let us investigate. Name of a cockroach, but this is the *bonne aventure!*

"No, my friend," he pushed me gently back as I started toward the tomb, "Jules de Grandin goes first."

IT WAS not without a shudder of repulsion that I followed my little friend through the narrow opening in the tomb, for the air inside the little enclosure was black and terrible, and solid-looking as if formed of ebony. But there was no chance to draw back, for close behind me, almost as excited as the Frenchman, pressed Eric Balderson.

The boxlike tomb was but the bulkhead above a narrow flight of stone stairs,steep-pitched as a ship's accommodation ladder, I discovered almost as soon as I had crawled inside, and with some maneuvering I managed to turn about in the narrow space and back down the steps.

Twenty steps, each about eight inches high, I counted as I descended to find myself in a narrow, stone-lined passageway which afforded barely room for us to walk in single file.

Marching ahead as imperturbably as though strolling down one of his native boulevards, de Grandin led the way, flashing the ray from his lantern along the smoothly paved passage. At length:

"We are arrived, I think," he announced. "And, unless I am mistaken, as I hope I am, we are in a *cul-de-sac*, as well."

The passage had terminated abruptly in a blank wall, and there was nothing for us to do, apparently, but edge around and retrace our steps. I was about to suggest this when a joyous exclamation from de Grandin halted me.

Feeling along the sandstone barrier, he had sunk to his knees, prodded the stone tentatively in several places, finally come upon a slight indentation, grooved as though to furnish hand-hold.

"Do you hold the light, Friend Trowbridge," he directed as he thrust the ferrule of his ebony cane into the depression and gave a mighty tug. "Ah, *parbleu*, it comes; it comes—we are not yet at the end of our tape!"

Resisting only a moment, the apparently solid block of stone had slipped back almost as easily as a well-oiled trap-door, disclosing an opening some three and a half feet high by twenty inches wide.

"The light, my friend—shine the light past me while I investigate," de Grandin breathed, stooping almost double to pass through the low doorway.

I bent as far forward as I could and shot the beam of light over his head, and lucky for him it was I did so, for even as his head disappeared through the cleft he jerked back with an exclamation of dismay. "Ha, villain, would you so?" he rasped, snatching the keen blade from his sword cane and thrusting it through the aperture with quick, venomous stabs.

At length, having satisfied himself that no further resistance offered beyond the wall, he sank once more to his bended knees and slipped through the hole. A moment later I heard him calling cheerfully, and, stooping quickly, I followed him, with Eric Balderson, making heavy work at jamming his great bulk through the narrow opening, bringing up the rear. De Grandin pointed dramatically at the wall we had just penetrated.

"*Morbleu,* he was thorough, that one," he remarked, inviting our attention to an odd-looking contrivance decorating the stones.

It was a heavy ship's boom, some six feet long, pivoted just above its center to the wall so that it swung back and forth like a gigantic pendulum. Its upper end was secured to a strand of heavily tarred cable, and fitted with a deep notch, while to its lower extremity was securely bolted what appeared to be the fluke from an old-fashioned ship's anchor, weighing at least three stone and filed and ground to an axlike edge. An instant's inspection of the apparatus showed us its simplicity and diabolical ingenuity. It was secured by a brace of wooden triggers in a horizontal position above the little doorway through which we had entered, and the raising of the stone panel acted to withdraw the keepers till only a fraction of their tips supported the boom. Pressure on the sill of the doorway completed the operation, and sprung the triggers entirely back, permitting the timber with its sharpened iron tip to swing downward across the opening like a gigantic headsman's ax, its knife-sharp blade sweeping an arc across the doorway's top where the head of anyone entering was bound to be. But for the warning furnished by the beam of light preceding him, and the slowness of the machine's operation after a century or more of inactivity, de Grandin would have been as cleanly decapitated by the descending blade as a convict lashed to the cradle of a guillotine.

"But what makes the thing work?" I asked curiously. "I should think that whoever set it in place would have been obliged to spring it when he made his exit. I can't see——"

"*S-sst!*" the Frenchman cut me off sharply, pointing to the deadly engine.

Distinctly, as we listened, came the sound of tarred hawsers straining over pulley-wheels, and the iron-shod beam began to rise slowly, once more assuming a horizontal position.

I could feel the short hairs at the back of my neck rising in company with the boom as I watched the infernal spectacle, but de Grandin, ever fearless, always curious, wasted no time in speculation. Advancing to the wall, he laid his hand upon the cable, tugging with might and main, but without visible effect on the gradually rising spar. Giving over his effort, he laid his ear to the stones, listened intently a moment, then turned to us with one of his quick, elfish smiles. "He was clever, as well as wicked, the old villain who invented this," he informed us. "Behold, beyond this wall is some sort of a mechanism worked by running water, my friends. When the trigger retaining this death-dealer is released, water is also undoubtlessly permitted to run from a cask or tank attached to the other end of this rope. When the knife-ax has descended and made the unwelcome visitor shorter by a head, the flowing water once more fills the tank, hoists the ax again to its original position, and *pouf!* he are ready to behead the next uninvited guest who arrives. It are clever, yes. I much regret that we have not the time to investigate the mechanism, for I am convinced something similar opens the door through which we entered—perhaps once each year at the season of the ancient Saturnalia—but we did come here to investi-

gate something entirely quite different, eh, Friend Balderson?"

Recalled to our original purpose, we looked about the chamber. It was almost cubical in shape, perhaps sixteen feet long by as many wide, and slightly less in height. Save the devilish engine of destruction at the entrance, the only other fixture was a low coffinlike block of stone against the farther wall.

Examining this, we found it fitted with hand-grips at the sides, and two or three tugs at these heaved the monolith up on end, disclosing a breast-high, narrow doorway into a second chamber, somewhat smaller than the first, and reached by a flight of some five or six stone steps.

Quickly descending these, we found ourselves staring at a long stone sarcophagus, bare of all inscription and ornament, save the grisly emblem of the "jolly roger," or piratical skull and thigh-bones, graven on the lid where ordinarily the name-plate would have rested, and a stick of dry, double-forked wood, something like a capital X in shape, which lay transversely across the pirate emblem.

"Ah, what have we here?" inquired de Grandin coolly, approaching the coffin and prying at its lid with his cane-sword.

To my surprize, the top came away with little or no effort on our part, and we stared in fascination at the unfleshed skeleton of a short, thick-set man with enormously long arms and remarkably short, bandy legs.

"Queer," I muttered, gazing at the relic of mortality. "You'd have thought anyone who went to such trouble about his tomb and its safeguards would have been buried in almost regal raiment, yet this fellow seems to have been laid away naked as the day he was born. This coffin has been almost airtight for goodness knows how many years, and there ought to be some evidence of cerements left, even if the flesh has moldered away."

De Grandin's litle blue eyes were shining with a sardonic light and his small, even teeth were bared beneath the line of his miniature golden mustache as he regarded me. "Naked, unclothed, without fitting cerements, do you say, Friend Trowbridge?" he asked. Prodding with his sword blade between the skeleton's ribs a moment, he thrust the flashlight into my grip with an impatient gesture and put both hands elbow-deep into the charnel box, rummaging and stirring about in the mass of nondescript material on which the skeleton was couched. "What say you to this, and these—and these?" he demanded.

My eyes fairly started from my face as the electric torch ray fell on the things which rippled and flashed and sparkled between the little Frenchman's white fingers. There were chains of gold encrusted with rubies and diamonds and greenly glowing emeralds; there were crosses set with amethyst and garnet which any mitered prince of the church might have been proud to wear; there were ear- and finger-rings with brilliant settings in such profusion that I could not count them, while about the sides of the coffin were piled great stacks of broad gold pieces minted with the effigy of his most Catholic Majesty of Spain, and little hillocks of unset gems which sparkled and scintillated dazzlingly.

"Regal raiment did you say, Friend Trowbridge?" de Grandin cried, his breath coming fast as he viewed the jewels with ecstasy. "*Cordieu*, where in all the world is there a monarch who takes his last repose on such a royal bed as this?"

"It—it's real!" Balderson breathed unbelievingly. "It wasn't a pipe-dream, after all, then. We're rich, men—*rich!* Oh, Marian, if it only weren't too late!"

De Grandin matter-of-factly scooped up a double handful of unset gems and deposited them in his overcoat pocket. "What use has this old *drôle*

for all this wealth?" he demanded. "*Mordieu*, we shall find better use for it than bolstering up dead men's bones! Come, my friends, bear a hand with the treasure; it is high time we were leaving this—Trowbridge, my friend, watch the light!"

Even as he spoke I felt the flashlight slipping from my fingers, for something invisible had struck me a numbing blow across the knuckles. The little lantern fell with a faint musical tinkle into the stone coffin beside the grinning skull and we heard the soft *plop* as its airless bulb exploded at contact with some article of antique jewelry.

"Matches—strike a light, someone, *pour l'amour de Dieu!*" de Grandin almost shrieked. "It is *nécessaire* that we have light to escape from this so abominable place without having our heads decapitated!"

I felt for my own flashlight, but even as I did so there was a faint hissing sound, the sputter of a safety match against its box, and—the breath of a glowing furnace seemed suddenly to sweep the room as the heavy, oppressive air was filled with dancing sheets of many-colored flames and a furious detonation shook the place. As though seized in some giant fist, I felt myself lifted bodily from the floor and hurled with devastating force against the wall, from which I rebounded and fell forward senseless on the stone-paved floor.

"TROWBRIDGE—Trowbridge, good, kind friend, tell us that you survive!" I heard de Grandin's tremulous voice calling from what seemed a mile or more away as I felt the fiery trickle of brandy between my teeth.

"Eh? Oh, I'm all right—I guess," I replied as I sat up and forced the little Frenchman's hip-flask from my lips. "What in the world happened? Was it——"

"*Morbleu*," laughed my friend, his spirits already recovered, "I thought old Bare-bones in the coffin yonder had returned from hell and brought his everlasting fires with him. We, my friends, are three great fools, but Jules de Grandin is the greatest. When first I entered this altogether detestable tomb, I thought I smelled the faint odor of escaping illuminating-gas, but so great was my curiosity before we forced the coffin, and so monstrous my cupidity afterward, that I dismissed the matter from my mind. Assuredly there passes close by here some main of the city's gas pipes, and there is a so small leak in one of them. The vapor has penetrated the graveyard earth in small quantities and come into this underground chamber. Not strong enough to overpower us, it was none the less in sufficient concentration to explode with one great *boom* when Friend Balderson struck his match. Fortunately for us, the doors behind are open, thus providing expansion chambers for the exploding gas. Otherwise we should have been annihilated altogether entirely.

"Come, the gas has blown away with its own force and we have found Friend Trowbridge's flashlight. *Mordieu*, my ten fingers do itch most infernally to be at the pleasant task of counting this ill-gotten wealth!"

SCRAMBLING over the cemetery wall was no light task, since each of us had filled his pockets with Spanish gold and jewels until he scaled almost twice his former weight, and it was necessary for Balderson and de Grandin to boost me to the wall crest, then for de Grandin to push from below while I lent a hand from above to help Balderson up, finally for the pair of us to drag the little Frenchman up after us.

"Lucky for us the wind has risen and the snow recommenced," de Grandin congratulated as we made our way down the deserted street, walking with a rolling gait, like heavy-laden ships in a high sea;

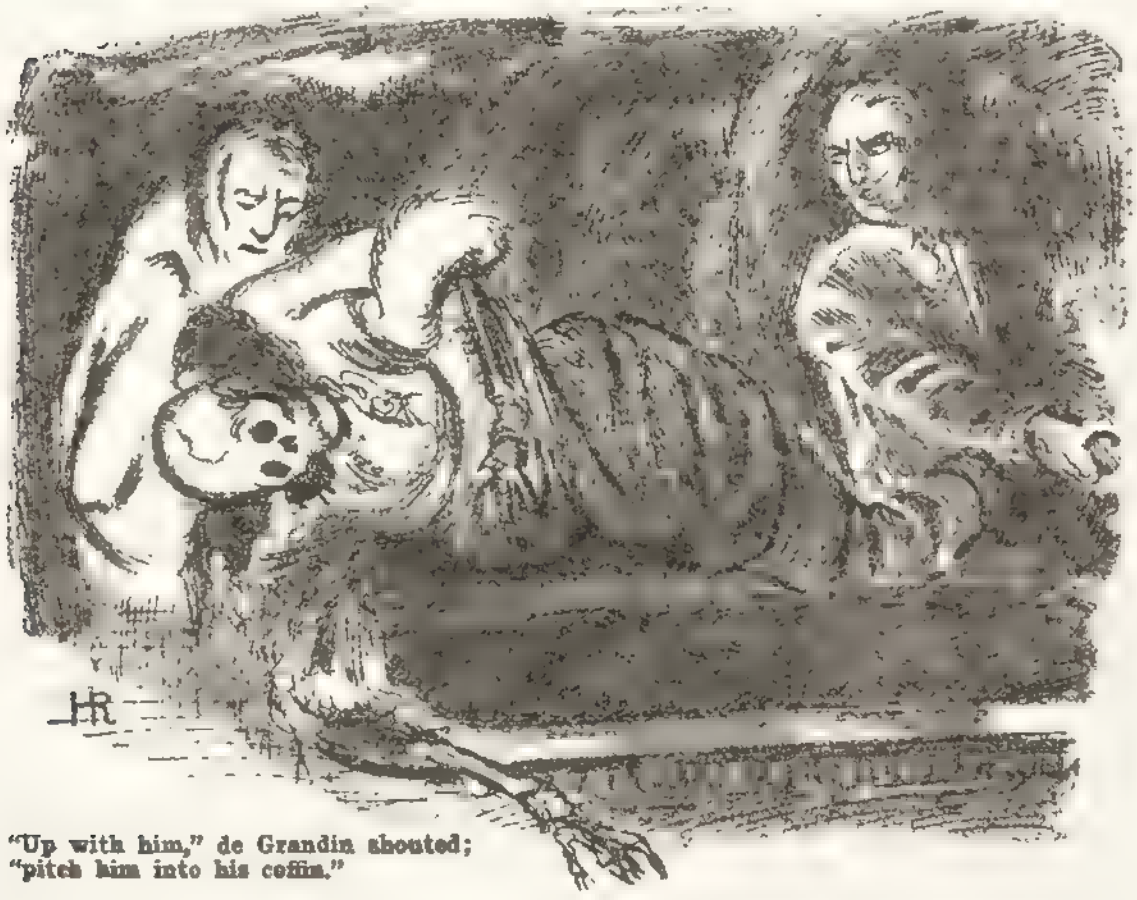
"within an hour the snow inside the cemetery will be so drifted that none will know we visited there tonight. Let us hail a taxi, *mes amis;* I grow weary bearing this great weight of wealth about."

3

"NAME of a small green rooster," Jules de Grandin exclaimed delightedly, his little blue eyes shining with elation in the light of the library lamp, "we are rich, my friends, rich beyond the wildest dreams of Monte Cristo! Me, I shall have a Parisian *appartement* which shall be the never-ending wonder of all beholders; a villa on the Riviera; a ducal palace in Venice—no less!—and—*grand Dieu,* what is that?"

Above the wailing of the storm-wind, half obliterated by the keening blasts, there came to us from the street outside the scream of a woman in mortal terror: "Help—help—ah, help!" the last desperate appeal so thin and high with panic horror that we could scarce distinguish it from the skirling of the gale.

"Hold fast—courage—we come! we come!" de Grandin shouted, as he burst through the front door, cleared the snow-swept porch with a single bound and raced hatless into the white-swathed street. "Where are you, *Madame?*" he cried, pausing at the curb and looking expectantly up and down the deserted highway. "Call out, we are here!" For another moment he searched the desolate street with his gaze; then, "Courage!" he cried, vaulting a knee-high drift and rushing toward a dark,



"Up with him," de Grandin shouted; "pitch him into his coffin."

huddled object lying in the shifting snow a hundred feet or so away.

Balderson and I hurried after him, but he had already raised the woman's lolling head in the crook of his elbow and was preparing to administer stimulant from his ever-ready flask when we arrived.

She was a young girl, somewhere between seventeen and twenty, to judge by her face, neither pretty nor ill-favored, but with the clean, clear complexion of a well-brought-up daughter of lower middle-class people. About her flimsy party dress was draped a cloth coat, wholly inadequate to the chill of the night, trimmed with a collar of nondescript fur, and the hat which was pushed back from her blond bobbed hair was the sort to be bought for a few dollars at any department store.

De Grandin bent above her with all the deference he would have shown a duchess in distress. "What was it, *Mademoiselle?*" he asked solicitously. "You did call for assistance—did you fall in the snow? Yes?"

The girl looked at him from big, terrified eyes, swallowed once convulsively, then murmured in a low, hoarse whisper: "His eyes! Those terrible eyes — they — ah, Jesus! Mercy!" In the midst of a pitiful attempt to sign herself with the cross, her body stiffened suddenly, then went limp in the Frenchman's arms; her slender bosom fluttered once, twice, then flattened, and her lower jaw fell slowly downward, as if in a half-stifled yawn. Balderson, layman that he was, mistook her senseless, imbecile expression for a bit of ill-timed horseplay and gave a half-amused titter. De Grandin and I, inured to vigils beside the moribund, recognized the trade mark stamped in those glazed, expressionless eyes and that drooping chin.

"*Ad te, Domine*——" the Frenchman bent his blond head as he muttered the prayer. Then: "Come, my friends, help me take her up. We must bear her in from the storm, then notify the police. Ha, something foul has been abroad this night; it were better for him if he runs not crosswise of the path of Jules de Grandin, *pardieu!*"

BREAKFAST was a belated meal next morning, for it was well after 3 o'clock before the coroner's men and police officers had finished their interrogations and taken the poor, maimed clay that once was gay little Kathleen Burke to the morgue for official investigation. The shadow of the tragedy sat with us at table, and none cared to discuss future joyous plans for squandering the pirate treasure. It was de Grandin who waked us from our gloomy reveries with a half-shouted exclamation.

"*Nom d'un nom*—another!" he cried. "Trowbridge, Balderson, my friends, give attention! Hear this item from *le journal*, if you please:

TWO GIRLS VICTIMS OF FIEND

Early this morning the police were informed of two inexplicable murders in the streets of Harrisonville. Kathleen Burke, 19, of 17 Bonham Place, was returning from a party at a friend's house when Drs. Trowbridge and de Grandin, of 993 Susquehanna Avenue, heard her screaming for help and rushed out to offer assistance, accompanied by Eric Balderson, their house guest. They found the girl in a dying condition, unable to give any account of her assailant further than to mumble something concerning his eyes. The body was taken to the city morgue for an inquest which will be held today.

Rachel Müller, 26, of 445 Essex Avenue, a nurse in the operating-room at Mercy Hospital, was returning to her home after a term of special night duty a few minutes before 3 a. m. when she was set upon from behind by a masked man wearing a fantastic costume which she described to the police as consisting of a tight-fitting coat, loose, baggy pantaloons and high boots, turned down at the top, and a stocking-cap on his head. He seized her by the throat, and she managed to fight free, whereupon he attacked her with a dirk-knife, inflicting several wounds of a serious nature. Officer Timothy Dugan heard the woman's outcries and hurried to her rescue, finding her bleeding profusely and in a serious condition. He administered first aid and rang

for an ambulance in which she was removed to Casualty Hospital, where she was unable to give a more detailed description of her attacker. She died at 4:18 this morning. Her assailant escaped. The police, however, claim to be in possession of several reliable clues and an arrest is promised in the near future.

"What say you to that, my friends?" the Frenchman demanded. "Me, I should say we would better consult——"

"Sergeant Costello, sor," Nora McGinnis, my household factotum, announced from the breakfast room door as she stood aside to permit the burly, red-haired Irishman to enter.

"*Ah, bonjour, Sergent,*" de Grandin greeted with a quick smile. "Is it that you come to lay the clues to the assassin of those two unfortunate young women before us?"

Detective Sergeant Jeremiah Costello's broad, red face went a shade more rubescent as he regarded the diminutive Frenchman with an affectionate grin. "Sure, Dr. de Grandin, sor, 'tis yerself as knows when we're handin' out th' straight goods an' when we're peddlin' th' bull," he retorted. "Ain't it th' same wid th' johnny darmes in Paree? Sure, it is. Be gorry, if we had so much as one little clue, rayliable or not, we'd be huggin' an' kissin' ourselves all over th' place, so we would. 'Tis fer that very reason, an' no other, I'm after troublin' ye at yer breakfast this marnin'. Wud ye be willin' to listen to th' case, as far as we know it, I dunno?"

"Say on, *mon vieux,*" de Grandin returned, his eyes shining and sparkling with the joy of the born man-hunter in the chase. "Tell us all that is in your mind, and we may together arrive at some solution. Meantime, may I not make free of Dr. Trowbridge's hospitality to the extent of offering you a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks, sor, don't mind if I do," the detective accepted; "it's mortal cold outside today.

"Now to begin wid, we don't know no more about who committed these here murthers, or why he done it, than a hog knows about a holiday, an' that's a fact. They tell me at headquarters that th' little Burke gur-rl (God rest her soul!) said something about th' felly's eyes to you before she died, an' Nurse Müller raved about th' same thing, though she was able to give some little bit of day-scription of him, as well. But who th' divil would be goin' around th' streets o' nights murtherin' pore, definseless young women—it's cases like this as makes policemen into nervous wrecks, Dr. de Grandin, sor. Crimes o' passion an' crimes committed fer gain, they're meat an' drink to me, sor—I can understand 'em—but it's th' divil's own job runnin' down a johnny who goes about committin' murthers like this. Sure, 'tis almost always th' sign of a loose screw in his steerin' gear, sor, an' who knows where to look fer 'im? He might be some tough mug, but 'tisn't likely. More apt to be some soft-handed gentleman livin' in a fine neighborhood an' minglin' wid th' best society. There's some queer goin's on among th' swells, sor, an' that's gospel; but we can't go up to every bur-rd that acts funny at times an' say, 'Come wid me, young felly me lad; it's wanted fer th' murther o' Kathleen Burke an' Rachel Müller ye are,' now can we?"

"*Hélas, non,*" the Frenchman agreed sympathetically. "But have you no clue of any sort to the identity of this foul miscreant?"

"Well, sor, since ye mention it, we have one little thing," the sergeant replied, delving into his inside pocket and bringing forth a folded bit of paper from which he extracted a shred of twisted yarn. "Would this be manin' annything to ye?" he asked as he handed it to de Grandin.

"U'm," the little Frenchman murmured thoughtfully as he examined the object carefully. "Perhaps, I

can not say at onee. Where did you come by this?"

"'Twas clutched in Nurse Müller's hand as tight as be-damned when they brought her to th' hospital, sor," the detective replied. "We're not sure 'twas from th' murtherer's fancy-dress costume, o' course, but it's better'n nothin' to go on."

"But yes—most certainly," de Grandin agreed as he rose and took the find to the surgery.

For a few minutes he was busily engaged with jeweler's loop and microscope; finally he returned with the shred of yarn partly unraveled at one end. "It would seem," he declared as he returned the evidence to Costello, "that this is of Turkish manufacture, though not recent. It is a high grade of angora wool; the outer scales have smooth edges, which signifies the quality of the fleece. Also, interwoven with the thread is a fine golden wire. I have seen such yarn, the wool cunningly intermixed with golden threads, used for tarboosh tassels of wealthy Moslems. But the style has not prevailed for a hundred years and more. This is either a very old bit of wool, or a cunning simulation of the olden style—I am inclined to think the former. After all, though, this thread tells little more than that the slayer perhaps wore the headgear of a Mohammedan. The nurse described him as wearing a stocking-cap or toboggan, I believe. In her excitement and in the uncertain light of early morning a fez might easily be mistaken for such a piece of headgear."

"Then we're no better off than we were at first?" the Irishman asked disappointedly.

"A little," de Grandin encouraged. "Your search has narrowed somewhat, for you need only include among your suspects those possessing genuine Turkish fezzes a hundred years or more old."

"Yeah," commented Costello gloomily. "An' after we've run all them down, all we haf ter do is go down ter th' seashore an' start countin' th' grains o' sand."

"*Tiens,* my friend, be not so downcast," de Grandin bade. "Like your so magnificent John Paul Jones, we have not yet commenced to fight. Come, *Sergent,* Trowbridge, let us to the morgue. Perhaps we shall discover something there, if the pig-clumsy physicians have not already spoiled matters with their autopsy knives.

"Balderson, *mon brave,* do you remain to guard that which requires watching. You have small stomach for the things Friend Trowbridge and I shall shortly look upon."

SIDE by side in the zinc-lined drawers of the city morgue's refrigerator lay the bodies of Kathleen Burke and Rachel Müller. De Grandin bent above the bodies, studying the discolorations on their throats in thoughtful silence. "U'm," he commented, as he turned to me with a quizzical expression, "is there not something these contusions have in common, Friend Trowbridge?"

Leaning forward, I examined the dark, purplish ridges banding both girls' throats. About the thickness of a lead-pencil, they ran about the delicate white skins, four on the left side, one on the right, with a small circular patch of discoloration in the region of the larynx, showing where the strangler had rested the heel of his hand as a fulcrum for his grip. "Why," I began, studying the marks carefully, "er, I can't say that I notice—by George, yes! The center finger of the throttler's hand was amputated at the second joint!"

"*Précisément,*" the Frenchman agreed. "And which hand is it, if you please?"

"The right, of course; see how his thumb pressed on the right side of his victim's throats."

"*Exactement,* and——"

"And that narrows Costello's search still more," I interrupted

eagerly. "All he has to do now is search for someone with half the second finger of his right hand missing, and——"

"And you do annoy me excessively," de Grandin cut in frigidly. "Your interruptions, they vex, they harass me. If I do not mistake rightly, we have already found him of the missing finger; at least, we have seen him."

I looked at him in open-mouthed amazement. Men afflicted with mysterious sadistic impulses, I knew, might move in normal society for years without being subject to suspicion, but I could recall no one of our acquaintance who possessed the maimed hand which was the killer's trade mark. "You mean——?" I asked blankly.

"Last night, or early this morning, *mon vieux,*" he returned. "You, perhaps, were too immediately concerned with dodging exploding gases to take careful note of all we saw in the charnel chamber beneath the ground, but me, I see everything. *The right middle finger of the skeleton we found in the coffin with the treasure was missing at the second joint.*"

"You're joking!" I shot back incredulously.

For answer he pointed silently to the still, dead forms before us. "Are *these* a joke, my friend?" he demanded. "*Cordieu,* if such they be, they are an exceedingly grim jest."

"But for heaven's sake," I demanded, "how could that skeleton leave its tomb and wander about the streets? Anyhow, Nurse Müller declared it was a *man* who attacked her, not a skeleton. And skeletons haven't eyes, yet poor little Kathleen spoke of her assailant's eyes the first thing when we found her."

He turned his back on my expostulations with a slight shrug and addressed himself to the morgue master. "Have they arrived at the precise causes of death, *Monsieur?*" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the official replied. "The little Burke girl died o' heart failure consequent upon shock. Miss Müller died from loss o' blood an'——"

"Never mind, my friend, it is enough," de Grandin interrupted. "Strangulation was present in both cases, but apparently was not the primary cause of either death. That was all I desired to learn.

"Trowbridge, my friend," he assured me as we parted at the mortuary door, "he practises."

"Practises—who?" I demanded. But de Grandin was already out of earshot, walking down the street at a pace which would have qualified him for entry in a professional pedestrians' race.

4

THE consommé was growing cold in the tureen, Balderson and I were becoming increasingly aware of our appetites, and Nora McGinnis was on the verge of nervous prostration as visions of her elaborate dinner spoiling on the stove danced before her mind's eye when Jules de Grandin burst through the front door, a film of snowflakes from the raging storm outside decorating his shoulders like the ermine on a judge's gown. "Quick, Friend Trowbridge," he ordered as he drew up his chair to the table, "fill my plate to overflowing. I hunger, I starve, I famish. Not so much as one little crumb of luncheon has passed my lips this day."

"Find out anything?" I asked as I ladled out a liberal portion of smoking chicken broth.

"*Cordieu,* I shall say so, and he who denies it is a most foul liar!" he returned with a grin. "Observe this, if you please."

From his pocket he produced an odd-looking object, something like a fork of dried weed or a root of desiccated ginger, handing it first to me, then to Eric Balderson for inspection.

"All right, I'll bite—what is it?"

Eric admitted as the little Frenchman eyed us in turn expectantly.

"*Mandragora officinalis* — mandrake," he replied with another of his quick smiles. "Have you not seen it before?"

"U'm"—I searched the pockets of my memory a moment—"isn't this the thing we found on the old pirate's coffin last night?"

"Exactly, precisely, quite so!" he replied delightedly, patting his hands together softly as though applauding at a play. "You have right, good friend; but last night we were too much concerned with saving our silly heads from the swinging ax, with finding gold and gems, and similar useless things to give attention to matters of real importance. Behold, my friends, with this bit of weed-root and these, I shall make one *sacré singe*—a monkey, no less—of that so vile murderer who terrorizes the city and slays inoffensive young women in the night. Certainly." As he finished speaking, he thrust his hand into another pocket and brought forth a dozen small conical objects which he pitched onto the table-cloth with a dramatic gesture.

"Bullets!" Balderson remarked wonderingly. "What——"

"Bullets, no less," de Grandin agreed, taking a pair of the little missiles into his hand and joggling them up and down playfully. "But not such bullets as you or Friend Trowbridge have seen before, I bet me your life. Attend me: these are silver, solid silver, without a trace of alloy. *Eh bien,* but I did have the fiend's own time finding a jeweler who would undertake to duplicate the bullets of my pistol in solid silver on such short notice. But at last, *grâce à Dieu,* I found him, and he fashioned these so pretty things to my order and fitted them into the shells in place of the nickel-plated projectiles. For good measure I ordered him to engrave each one with a cross at its tip, and then, on my way home, I did stop at the church of Saint Bernard and dip them each and every one into the font of *eau bénite.* Now, I damn think, we shall see what we shall see this night."

"What in the world——" I began, but he shut me off with upraised hand.

"The roast, Friend Trowbridge," he implored, "for dear friendship's sake, carve me a liberal portion of the roast and garnish it well with potatoes. Do but permit that I eat my fill, and, when the time arrives, I shall show you such things as to make you call yourself one colossal liar when you recall them to memory!"

SERGEANT COSTELLO, thoroughly disgruntled at hours of vigil in the snowy night and completely mystified, was waiting for us beside the entrance to Saint David's churchyard. "Sure, Dr. de Grandin, sor," he announced as he stepped from the shelter of the pentice, blowing on his numbed fingers, "'tis th' divil's own job ye gave me tonight. Me eyes have been skinned like a pair o' onions all th' night long, but niver a bit o' annyone comin' in or out o' th' graveyard have I seen."

"Very good, my friend," de Grandin commented. "You have done most well, but I fear me one will attempt to pass you, and by the inward route, before many minutes have gone. You will kindly await our outcoming, if you please, and we shall be no longer than necessary, I assure you."

Forcing the sliding door of the tombstone, we hastened down the stairway to the burial chamber in de Grandin's wake, sprung the guarding ax at the entrance of the first room and crept into the inner cavern. One glance was sufficient to confirm our suspicions. The stone coffin was empty.

"Was—was it like this when you were here today?" I faltered.

"No," de Grandin answered, "he lay in his bed as calmly as a babe in its cradle, my friend, *but he lay on his side.*"

"On his side? Why, that's impossible! The skeleton was on its back when we came here last night, and we didn't move it. How came the change of posture?"

"*Tiens,* who can say?" he replied. "Perhaps he rests better that way. Of a certainty, he had lain long enough on his posterior to have become tired of it. It may be—*sssh!* Lights out. To your quarters!"

Balderson and I rushed to opposite corners of the room, as de Grandin had previously directed, our powerful electric bull's-eye lanterns shut off, but ready to flood the place with light at a second's notice. De Grandin stationed himself squarely in line with the door, his head thrust forward, his knees slightly bent, his entire attitude one of pleased anticipation.

What sixth sense had warned him of approaching danger I know not, for in the absolute quiet of the pitch-dark chamber I could hear no sound save the low, short breaths of my two companions and the faint trickle-trickle of water into the tank of the beheading machine which guarded the entrance of the farther room. I was about to speak, when:

Bang! The muffled detonation of a shot fired somewhere above ground sounded startlingly, followed by another and still another; then the rasping, high-pitched cackle of a maniacal laugh, a scraping, shuffling step on the narrow stone stairs, and:

"Lights, *pour l'amour de Dieu,* lights!" de Grandin shrieked as something—some malign, invisible, unutterably wicked *presence* seemed suddenly to fill the chamber, staining the inky darkness still more black with its foul effluvium.

As one man Balderson and I snapped up the shutters of our lanterns, and the converging beams displayed a frightful tableau.

Crouched at the low entrance of the cavern, like a predatory beast with its prey, was a fantastic figure, a broad, squat—almost humpbacked—man arrayed in leathern jerkin, Turkish fez and loose, baggy pantaloons tucked into hip-boots of soft Spanish leather. About his face, masklike, was bound a black-silk kerchief with two slits for eyes, and through the openings there glowed and glittered a pair of baleful orbs, green-glossed and vitreous, like those of a cat, but fiercer and more implacable than the eyes of any feline.

Over one malformed shoulder, as a miller might carry a sack of meal, the creature bore the body of a girl, a slight, frail slip of femininity with ivory face and curling hair of deepest black, her thin, frilly party dress ripped to tatters, one silver slipper fallen from her silk-sheathed foot, the silver-tissue bandeau which bound her hair dislodged so that it lay half across her face like the bandage over the eyes of a condemned felon.

"*Monsieur le Pirate,*" de Grandin greeted in a low, even voice, "you do roam afield late, it seems. We have waited overlong for you."

The mask above the visitant's face fluttered outward with the pressure of breath behind it, and we could trace the movement of jaws beneath the silk, but no word of answer came to the Frenchman's challenge.

"Ah—so? You choose not to talk?" de Grandin queried sarcastically. "Is it perhaps that you prefer deeds to words? *C'est bien!*" With a quick, skipping step he advanced several paces toward the creature, raising his pistol as he moved.

A peal of sardonic, tittering laughter issued from beneath the mask. Callous as a devil, the masked thing dropped the girl's lovely body to the stone floor, snatched at the heavy hanger in his belt and leaped straight for de Grandin's throat.

The Frenchman fired even as his antagonist charged, and the effect of his shot was instantaneous. As though he had run against a barrier of iron, the masked pirate stopped in mid-stride and staggered back an un-

certain step, but de Grandin pressed his advantage. "Ha, you did not expect this, *hein?*" he demanded with a smile which was more like a snarl. "You who defy the bullets of policemen and make mock of all human resistance thought you would add one more victim to your list, *n'est-ce-pas, Monsieur?* Perhaps, *Monsieur le Mort-félon,* you had not thought of Jules de Grandin?"

As he spoke he fired another shot into the cowering wretch, another, and still another until eight silver balls had pierced the cringing thing's breast.

As the final shot went home the fantastical, terrible shape began to change before our eyes. Like the cover of a punctured football the gaudy, archaic costume began to wrinkle and wilt, the golden-tasseled fez toppled forward above the masked face and the black-silk handkerchief itself dropped downward, revealing the unfleshed countenance of a grinning skull.

"Up with him, my friends," de Grandin shouted. "Pitch him into his coffin, clamp down the lid—here, lay the root of mandrake upon it! So! He is in again, and for all time.

"Now, one of you, take up poor *Mademoiselle* and pass her through the door to me.

"Very well, *Sergent,* we come, and bring the young lady with us!" he cried as Costello's heavy boots sounded raspingly on the stone steps outside. "Do not attempt to enter—it is death to put your head through the opening!"

A moment later, with the girl's body wrapped in the laprobe, we were driving toward my house, ignoring every speed regulation in the city ordinances.

5

SERGEANT COSTELLO looked askance at the rug-wrapped form occupying the rear seat of my car. "Say, Dr. de Grandin, sor," he ventured with another sidewise glance at the lovely body, "hadn't we best be notifyin' th' coroner, an' "—he gulped over the word—"an' gittin' a undertaker fer this here pore young lady?"

"Coroner—undertaker? *À bas les croque-morts!* Your wits are entirely absent harvesting the wool of sheep, *cher sergent.* The only undertaker of which she stands in need is the excellent Nora McGinnis, who shall give her a warm bath to overcome her chill after Friend Trowbridge and I have administered stimulants. Then, unless I mistake much, we shall listen to a most remarkable tale of adventure before we restore her to the arms of her family."

HALF an hour later our fair prize, revived by liberal doses of aromatic ammonia and brandy, thoroughly warmed by a hot sponge and alcohol rub administered by the competent Nora, and with one of de Grandin's vivid flowered-silk dressing-gowns slipped over the sorry remnants of her tattered party costume, sat demurely before our library fire. As she entered the room, Eric Balderson, who had not seen her face before, because of the bandeau which obscured it in the cave, gave a noticeable start, then seemed to shrink back in his corner of the ingle-nook.

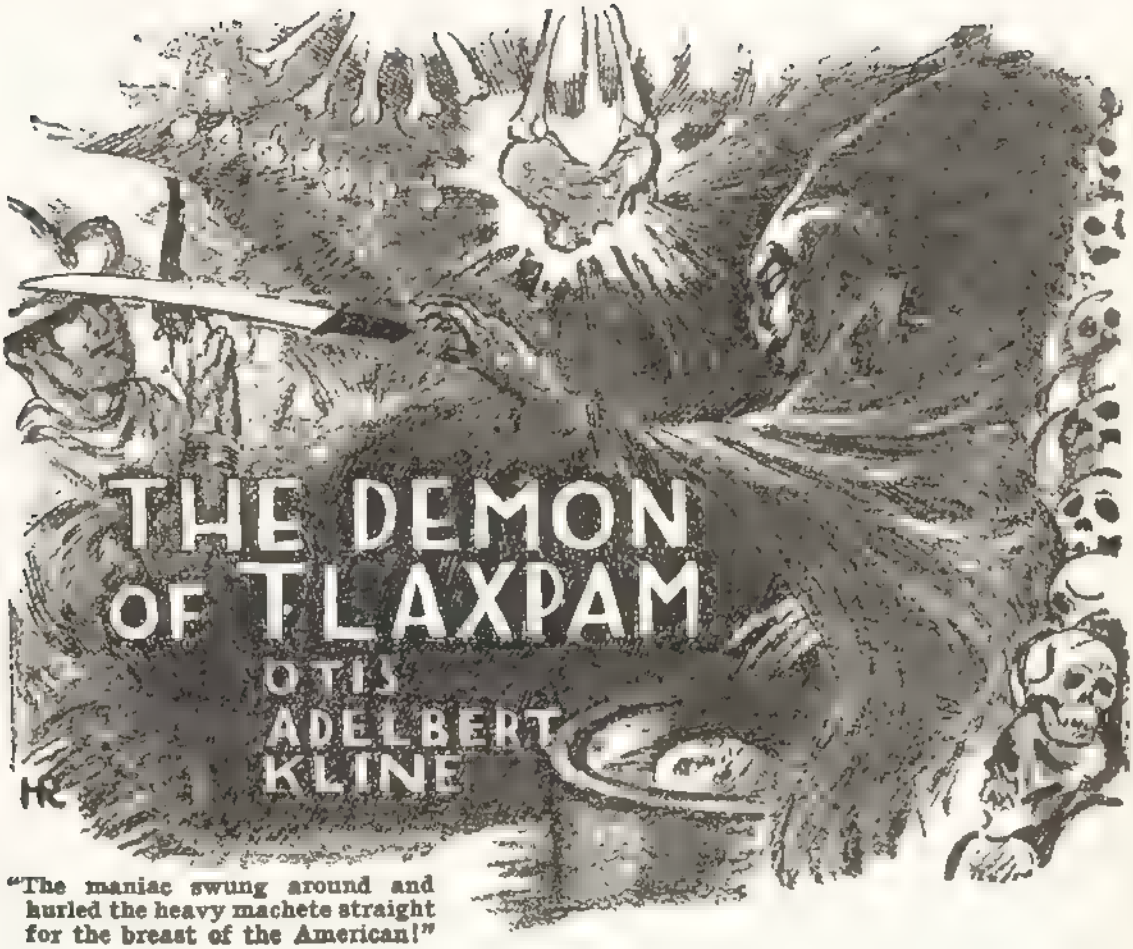
Not so Jules de Grandin. Swinging one well-tailored leg across the corner of the library table, he regarded the young lady with a level, unwinking stare till the sustained scrutiny became embarrassing. Finally:

"*Mademoiselle,* you will have the kindness to tell us exactly what has happened to you this night, so far as you can remember," he ordered.

The girl eyed him with a tremulous smile a moment; then, taking a deep breath, launched on her recital like a child speaking a piece in school.

"I'm Marian Warner," she told us. "We live in Tunlaw Street—I think

(Continued on page 135)



"The maniac swung around and hurled the heavy machete straight for the breast of the American!"

"A TABLE for wan, *señor*? I 'ave ver' ex'lent place where the *señor* can see those dance girl do——"

"No."

Standing just within the doorway of Mexican Joe's notorious café, Bart Leslie scarcely noticed the diminutive head waiter, bowing solicitously before him. Leisurely, yet with piercing intentness, his eyes swept the smoke-clouded room, hovering for a moment at each table. The contortions of a dancing girl in flaming costume, slender hands on lissom hips, mantilla flying, tiny feet keeping time with the throbbing music of a brown-skinned orchestra, drew only a cursory glance from him.

"Per'aps the *señor* likes company. Yes? A table for two in a quiet corner, an' I send you wan ver' beautiful——"

"No! Where's Mexican Joe?"

"Ees talk weeth some friend upstair. You weesh——?"

"Tell him Bart Leslie wants to see him, *muy pronto*! *Sabe*?"

"*Si, señor. Gracias, señor.*"

Deftly catching the silver dollar which Leslie had flipped to him, he sped away among the tables and hastily climbed the stairway which led to a gallery over the orchestra platform and thence to the gaming-rooms above.

Leslie rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and waited. Presently he took a tightly wadded slip of yellow paper from his vest pocket, unfolded it, and

scanned the contents. It was a Western Union telegram, and the date was the day previous:

MR. BART LESLIE
BONITA
DO ME THE HONOR TO DINE WITH ME AT MEXICAN JOE'S TOMORROW EVENING AT EIGHT. I HAVE AN IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION.
HERNANDEZ

Leslie folded and pocketed the missive once more, then glanced at his watch. It showed five minutes past 8. Time and place were correct, but where was Hernandez? And which Hernandez? He had known two—one a vaquero formerly employed on the Bar-X Ranch, the other an ex-captain of the Gila Men, a dread order of bandits, counterfeiters, kidnapers and murderers which he had helped to wipe out some time before.

His meditations were interrupted by the obsequious approach of the head waiter, followed by a short, wizened Mexican whose forehead was creased by a livid scar, and whom he instantly recognized as Mexican Joe.

The latter was effusive in his greeting.

"Ah, Señor Leslie, I am delight! I am honor, to 'ave the great Two-Gun Bart, the great Devil-Fighter, weeth us! Don Arturo ees wait for you een wan private alcove. Myself, I weel show you the way."

Considering that this same wily Mexican had once tried to drug him for a few paltry dollars, Leslie imagined that he was anything but delighted by his presence.

"All right, Joe, lead on," he said tersely. Then, loosening his two six-shooters in their holsters, both as a precaution and as a hint that he was prepared for treachery, Leslie followed the café proprietor between the tables and behind the orchestra platform to where a double row of curtained alcoves served as private dining-rooms for the more fastidious or secretive of the resort's patrons. Pausing before one of these, he gently called:

"Don Arturo."

"*Si?*"

"Señor Leslie ees arrive."

"*Bueno!*"

The curtains parted and a tall, handsome Mexican, resplendent in purple velvet liberally trimmed with silver braid and adorned with buttons of the same metal, appeared in the opening and held out a slim hand, on one finger of which a dazzling ruby sparkled.

"*Buenas noches,* Señor Leslie," he greeted.

"May God give the same to you, *Señor Capitan,*" replied Leslie, instantly recognizing Hernandez as a former officer of the dreaded Gilas.

After the handshake they entered the booth and were seated at opposite sides of the narrow table.

"No longer am I a *capitan, amigo,*" said Hernandez, taking a frost-covered cocktail-shaker from the table and rattling its contents. "Only plain Don Arturo Hernandez, a civilian in the employ of my government."

"A decided improvement, I should say," replied Leslie, "and judging from that go-to-hell outfit you're wearing, you're making it pay."

Hernandez smiled.

"Ees not so bad," he replied, removing the top from the shaker. "I 'ave concoct wan dreenk which I 'ope you weel like. Those Manhattan an' Bronchitis cocktails I don' care for, an' I know you don' drink those tequila an' mescal, so I meex a dreenk where we meet on common ground."

He filled Leslie's glass, then his own.

"To unending friendship, *amigo,*" he proposed.

Leslie bowed and drank the toast.

"A corking good Bacardi cocktail, if I'm a judge," he said. "Common ground is right! If your communication is as pleasing as your cocktail, we'll get along."

"It ees from my government," replied Hernandez, producing a large sealed envelope from his pocket, "an' it may be explain' quite briefly, though the details are here."

A waiter entered with the first course of the Mexican dinner accompanied by the usual plate of steaming *tortillas*. When he had departed Hernandez continued:

"My government was ver' mooch impress' by the way you clean out those Gila," he said, "an' such word has come to the capital of your prowess an' exploit along the border that they 'ave send me to request your co-operation in a matter weeth which they are unable to cope."

"Before you go any farther," said Leslie, "I may as well tell you that I am still in the United States Secret Service, and all my time and efforts belong to *my* government."

"That ees all arrange', *amigo*, in advance. My government 'as already approach and receive permission from yours to use your service eef we can make the satisfactory arrangement weeth you. It ees for you alone to say, now."

"I see. You believe in preparedness. Well, what's the racket?"

"It ees wan ver' dangerous beezness. Near a town call' Tlaxpam many people die now, for two years—ver' sudden, ver' horrible death. They walk or ride along trail. All sudden, zeep! The head, she ees gone! Cut-off, sleeck like wan whistle! Horse come to town weeth headless body or weethout rider many time. Travelers find bloody corpse along the road weethout head. Others say they 'ave seen Satanás heemself lurking een the bushes. Wan *peón* heard a hórrible laugh joost after a man was beheaded.

"Government send men to investigate. Zeep! They sometimes lose the head, too. They send the *Rurales*. Some *Rurales* also lose the head, but of thees murderer they can not find even wan track. Ees damn' bad beezness, I tal you."

"Sounds like a fairy-story to me."

"Maybe, but if you find thees fairy for my government they weel gladly pay you twenty thousand pesos and all expenses."

"Well. That sounds substantial enough. Let me see the papers."

Hernandez broke the seal of the envelope and handed him two documents. One was permission from the American officials for Leslie to spend sixty days in Mexico whenever he should elect to go. The other was from the Mexican government, commending his past unofficial services in ridding them of the Gilas, and offering him the reward mentioned by Hernandez. All expenses were to be paid regardless of whether or not he succeeded.

The Mexican watched him narrowly as he read and folded the last document.

"Ees all satisfy, *amigo?*" he asked.

"All Jake," Leslie replied.

"You weel go?"

"Of course."

"*Caspita!* I tol' my government you're not afraid of those devil heemself. Put heem there!"

Silently the two men shook hands across the table.

2

"SON of wan gun! You tromp my ten-spot weeth a queen, eh? How you like that, an' that, an' that? Pay me."

"High, low, Jack. That's plenty." Bart Leslie fished in his pocket for a moment, then brought forth a handful of change, part of which he tossed on the table before Hernandez. Then he looked out the window of the private car furnished by the Mexican government to facilitate their journey to Tlaxpam. "Ought to be there soon, hadn't we?" he asked.

"Five minute more, maybe. Wan more hand?"

"No thanks. Have to be getting my things together."

Walking unsteadily to his sleeping-compartment, for the car lurched violently at every step, he closed and strapped his bag and handed it to the porter. Hernandez followed after gathering up the cards, and together they made their way to the platform.

"So this is Tlaxpam!"

Leslie looked out over a small group of sun-baked adobe buildings, then clutched the rail as the train halted with a jerk. He observed that the streets were deserted and remembered that it was the lazy hour of the *siesta*. Even the dogs slept.

"Eees the end of wan journey—the beginning of another. Follow me, *amigo*."

Hernandez stepped down from the platform and led the way around the corner of the station, the porter following with their bags. Here a driver slept peacefully behind the wheel of an ancient and badly battered touring-car.

Hernandez shook him awake.

"*Alerta, hombre!*" he roared. "*Mil demonios!* Did I hire you to sleep for me?"

The man awoke, then took their bags from the grinning porter.

"Pardon, Don Arturo. I did not hear the train arrive."

"You sleep like an ox. Be off, then. You have your orders."

After considerable persuasion with crank and primer, the engine started noisily, and they rattled off down a narrow, dusty street. Presently they stopped before one of the larger adobe houses, the door of which was opened by a dark-skinned *mozo* as soon as they had stepped down from the tonneau.

After a bath, and a meal served by the same dusky servant, Leslie and Hernandez entered the patio to enjoy their cigars, and found comparative coolness on a bench beneath the spreading branches of a huge pecan tree.

"And now, *señor*," inquired Hernandez, politely, "how soon will you be willing to start on thees dangerous beezness?"

"Start? I have already started. What I want to do is to continue, and the sooner the better."

The Mexican puffed reflectively for a moment.

"You Americans are so eempetuous. Maybe you 'ave not notice something, eh? I breeng you here during the hour of the *siesta*. I speak not your name, but call you only '*amigo*' een front of my *mozos*. For why? Thees fairy, as you call heem, may 'ave the spy any place. Een my very house! Eef he know you are here you are mark for death before you start. *Sabe?*"

"I see. You want me at least to get one chance at him before he bumps me off. But what makes you think he has spies?"

"Those other come. Zeep! They lose the head too damn' queek. I don' like. They come weeth beeg noise and brag *muy mucho*. You come weethout noise and maybe do something. When they come everybody know. When you come, only I know. Ees not bad idea, eh?"

"Excellent logic, I should say. In any event it would be taking needless chances to herald my coming and my errand. But how and when do I start after your friend? 'Ogre' would perhaps be a better name."

"Tonight at midnight. Between now and that time you weel get all the rest and sleep you can. At 12 I weel 'ave a guide and horses to take you into the danger zone. Twelve picked men, armed to the teeth and carrying provisions and equipment, weel follow a half-mile behind you. They weel rush to your aid at the sound of a shot, and weel be subject to your command at all times. I 'ave arrange weeth a friend to quarter you een case you find it necessary to make camp. And now, *amigo*, weel you 'ave a leetle *siesta* before dinner?"

Bart Leslie tossed his cigar butt into the shrubbery, stretched his powerful arms, and grinned.

"That's the best thing you've said today," he replied.

3

FROM some near-by tower a bell tolled the hour of 11.

Leslie, who had retired immediately after dinner, was aroused from a sound slumber. He pushed back the covers and sat up in bed, trying to think what it was that had awakened him. Then the sound was repeated—a gentle tapping at his door.

Whipping one of his guns from the holster that swung from the belt on the chair beside him, he rose and tiptoed to the door.

"*Que gente?*" he asked. "Who is it?"

"Open, *amigo,*" came back the soft reply. "Ees Hernandez."

"Ahead of your schedule, aren't you?" asked Leslie as he swung the door back.

To his surprize, there was no one in sight. About to step out into the dark hallway, he suddenly changed his mind as the sound of subdued breathing came to him from the right. Instinctively he knew there was someone crouching beside the door.

The warning of Hernandez flashed through his mind. Death, he was positive, lurked there in the corner of the hall—the mysterious and horrible end that had overtaken his predecessors.

He must act, that was sure. But how? To shoot through the wall would be to arouse the household—perhaps the community—and if the wall were brick-lined the bullet might be ineffective. A heavy mahogany chair standing beside the door gave him an idea. He knew that a scant two feet separated the edge of the doorway and the corner of the hall, hence he could calculate, with reasonable precision, the position of his concealed enemy.

First tucking his gun beneath his pajama belt, he quietly picked up the heavy chair by the back. Then, turning it so the front of the seat was forward, he swung it aloft and brought it down with crushing force at the point where he calculated the man's head would be.

As the chair struck a solid object a grunt of surprize and pain came from the corner, a heavy body pitched downward across the doorway, and a large machete clattered to the tile floor.

Before Leslie could find the switch to turn on his own light another flashed on in the hallway. There followed the patter of feet and a muttered exclamation in Spanish.

"*Madre de Dios!* They have keel the American already!"

"You mistake, Carlos. It is only a *peón.*"

Leslie lowered his gun as he saw Hernandez and another Mexican, both in their sleeping-garments and carrying revolvers, rushing toward him.

"What ees happen, *amigo?*" the former asked him.

Leslie leaned nonchalantly on the back of the chair and mechanically reached toward his breast pocket for his makings, then remembered he was still attired in his pajamas, and grinned.

"That *hombre* knocked on my door and I thought it was you, so I opened it. When I found he was hiding in the corner I figured he wasn't friendly, so I quieted him with this chair."

"Ees plenty quiet, I tal you," said Hernandez, bending over the prostrate man, who was barefooted and wore the simple white cotton jacket and pantaloons of the same material common to Mexicans of the poorest class. "I theenk maybe you 'ave keel heem. Let us see." He turned him over on his back and a livid bruise on his forehead showed where the heavy

chair had struck. Hernandez fingered this for a moment, then placed his ear to the fellow's heart. "Ees alive," he announced, "an' stunned." Turning to his companion, he said in Spanish. "Bind and gag him, Carlos. Perhaps we can make him talk when he revives."

The man called Carlos threw the would-be assassin over his shoulder as if he had been a sack of grain, and carried him off down the hallway.

"May as well dress now," said Leslie. "We can't get much sleep before midnight."

Hernandez shrugged.

"Joost as well," he replied. "Meet me downstairs when you are ready."

Some time later Leslie, wearing full cowboy attire and two businesslike forty-fives, stepped into the spacious living-room. Finding it untenanted, he sat down on a divan and rolled a cigarette. A full twenty minutes elapsed before Hernandez entered.

"Ees no use," he said. "That damn' *peón* don't talk."

"Came to, did he?"

"*Si*, some time ago. We threaten weeth the hot iron—everytheeng. No use. Says he don't know about these head-stealers."

"What's his story?"

"Says he came only to rob the rich *Americano*."

"But he carried a machete."

"To be sure. Eef you 'ad step through that door—zeep! We find you weethout the head. Those damn' fairy are wise already, I bat you. Per'aps you better not leave tonight, *amigo*."

"Fast little workers, aren't they? Crave action. Well, let's give 'em some. Keep that *hombre* here and get him to talk if you can, but meanwhile let me take the trail. I'm not going to be scared off by a sneaking *peón* with a machete."

"But, *señor*, it ees more dangerous than ever, now. A little later we might——"

"Nix on the *mañana* stuff. I'm going right now if you can get someone to guide me. Are your men afraid to go?"

Hernandez shruged.

"My men are brave," he replied, "but it ees sometimes best to meex brains weeth bravery. Go then, eef you are determine', but remember, *amigo*, I warned you." He clapped his hands and the man Carlos appeared in the doorway. "Send José," he ordered, "and saddle the horses. José Gonzaga," he explained to Leslie, "weel guide you. Ees three-quarter Indian, and speaks no English, so you weel 'ave to converse in the Spanish."

A moment later a tall, swarthy fellow entered. Although he wore the dress of a Mexican vaquero, his high cheekbones, hawk nose and dark skin bespoke a predominance of Aztec blood. He was beardless, and three livid scars, two on the right cheek and one on the forehead, added to the ferocity of his countenance. For armament he carried a knife and revolver, both stuck in his sash, a carbine slung across his back, and two well-filled cartridge belts.

"*Buenas noches, señores,*" he greeted with a flash of dazzling white teeth.

When both had made the customary polite reply, Hernandez said:

"Señor Leslie is determined to depart tonight, despite the fact that our plans have been discovered. You will therefore start at once and I will send the men after you as agreed." He turned to Leslie and extended his hand. "*Adios, amigo.* May good fortune attend you."

Leslie shook the proffered hand.

"*Gracias, señor,*" he replied. "I hope to play my cards better than I did on the train. *Adios.*"

4

JOSE led the way through the patio to the stables in the rear. Here Carlos held two rangy Mexican ponies, saddled and ready. To Leslie

he handed a carbine like that carried by the guide, and a long sheath-knife.

Swinging the gun across his back and attaching the knife to his belt, Leslie mounted and rode forth, followed by José. The latter took the lead as they threaded the narrow streets, lighted only by the waning moon. Later, when they emerged into the open country, they rode side by side.

At first they crossed a waste of sand, gleaming a dull silver in the moonlight and dotted here and there with desert growths—giant cacti that reared their armlike branches heavenward as if in a constant appeal for water, scrawny twisted mesquite in scattered clumps, and the more lowly prickly pears, their barbed and segmented branches twined and interlaced like the tentacles of cuttle-fish.

Later their trail led through a group of rocky hills, and thence along the bank of a narrow, tree-bordered stream, enclosed by towering canyon walls. When they entered the canyon, José paused.

"It is here, *señor*," he announced, "that the land of the demons begins. On this spot, just three nights ago, a headless body was found."

"And no trace of the murderer was discovered?"

"None. A riderless horse, blood-splattered and weary, wandered into Tlaxpam the next morning, and we knew what we would find, even before I started here with two companions. There was but one fresh trail—that of the horse that had borne the victim."

"Is the trail so little used?"

"Yes, *señor*, since the mysterious murders commenced. Formerly it was quite popular with those entering and leaving Tlaxpam from the north. Now it is shunned as a plague spot, although a detour of five miles is necessary to avoid this pass. Only strangers, travelers unacquainted with its bloody history, use it now, and these seldom live to boast of it. Many of these have been warned, have laughed at the warning, and have paid for their foolhardiness with their heads. A few who have escaped swear that they heard the whistling of the wings of Satan, who swooped down at them without warning, and whose frightful attack they avoided only by the utmost quickness and haste in riding away. Others claim to have heard his horrible, blood-curdling laugh, and still others to have seen him lurking in the undergrowth."

"There are many people with powerful imaginations," replied Leslie. "How long is this pass?"

"Nearly a mile. From now on we are in grave danger. Shall we proceed at once, or wait until daylight?"

"Let us go on."

Scarcely had these words passed the lips of the American than both men heard a noise in the pass ahead of them. Mingled with the distant clatter of horses' hoofs they heard someone singing or yelling—perhaps both—and the sounds were punctuated with the reports of a gun.

"Some drunken fool," said José. "Ah! The sounds have stopped. Perhaps the demons have killed him."

The sounds of voice and gun had died, but the patter of hoofs was still audible. There sounded, however, another voice, high-pitched, cackling, as if in demoniac laughter.

"*Santo Dios!* The laugh of Satanás!" cried José.

"Pull over to that side of the road, quick!" ordered Leslie. "I'll wait on this side."

They had not long to wait. The hoofbeats slowed down from a gallop to a singlefoot. A horse appeared, rounding a bend in the canyon wall, but the animal was without a rider.

"*Demonios!* It has happened!" exclaimed José, crossing himself devoutly. "Maria *Madre* preserve us!"

Leslie caught the bridle of the riderless horse and, producing his flashlight, examined the saddle and

the back of the beast. Both were spattered with blood.

"The body will be lying near the point where the singing ceased," said José. "Of that I am certain."

Again came the thunder of hoof-beats, this time from behind them.

"Our men are coming," José said. "They heard the shots and think we need help."

"Here, take the reins and bring the men forward when they arrive," ordered Leslie. "I'm going to look for the body and the murderer."

He spurred his pony forward. A short distance beyond the first bend he saw a ghastly thing in the moonlight—a headless body lying by the roadside. Dismounting, he brought his flashlight into play. There were no tracks of human being or animal near the body, other than those made by himself, his horse, and the horse of the victim. He walked ahead for fifty feet, then discovered a revolver in the dust of the road. Five of the six chambers had been discharged. Pocketing this, he again made his way forward. A walk of a quarter of a mile revealed no tracks other than those made by the victim's horse, and he knew the tragedy had not occurred that far back. Puzzled, he mounted and rode back to where José and the twelve men sent by Hernandez waited beside the body. The guide had dismounted and was standing beside the corpse.

"You found tracks of the murderer, *señor?*" he asked.

"Not a track."

"That was to be expected. I have found a paper on the body of this young fool, explaining why he rode through the pass. It seems he made a drunken wager with another young blood that he could come through unscathed. The paper is the other man's guarantee of the payment of a hundred pesos by this fellow's bank in case his headless body is found. What is to be done?"

"From what town did this man ride?"

"Rosario."

"Tie the body on the horse and let two of our men take it back to his relatives. Put the paper in the pocket where you found it."

When the two riders and the horse with its ghastly burden had been dispatched in accordance with his orders, Leslie posted his men by twos at intervals of a thousand feet along the canyon. Then, accompanied by José, he patrolled the road for the remainder of the night.

The first faint streaks of dawn found Leslie and his companion near the center of the danger zone. The former reined his horse to a halt as the odor of burning wood came to his nostrils.

"Someone is making camp near here," he said. "I smell smoke."

José smiled.

"It is only Tio Luis, the Anciano," he replied, "preparing his breakfast."

"Uncle Louis, the Old One? Who is he?"

"The Anciano is a very venerable hermit who braves the dangers of this pass to remain with the holy shrine of San Antonio, which he has attended since the death of good Father Salvador some years ago. Although he is but a lay brother, he is a most holy man, revered by all who know him, and a very good friend of Señor Hernandez. He has agreed to quarter our men if we find it necessary to remain."

"A shrine of St. Anthony here? But why has it not been moved?"

"Because it rests on a holy spot, venerated for more than two centuries. From a crevice in the hillside, just beside the niche containing the image of the saint, there flows a spring. This spring empties into a shallow pool where the sick have come to bathe for many generations and where countless miracles of healing have occurred. Whereas pilgrims

often came alone in former years and at all hours, they now come only in the middle of the day and in considerable numbers for mutual protection on acount of the murderous fiends who surround this place. Did not Señor Hernandez mention the Anciano?"

"He only said quarters had been provided for the men. How do we reach this place?"

"We have only to ride up the ravine at your left, down which this small stream trickles. It is the overflow from the sacred pool."

5

LESLIE assembled his men and led them up the steep path in the winding ravine which had been pointed out by José. Presently he emerged on a small plot of more even ground and beheld the home of the Anciano. It was a small abode hut, built against the steep hillside. On the left of the hut was a niche containing a life-size image of St. Anthony, and just in front of the image was the pool described by his guide, which was fed by a spring that bubbled from the rock. From a battered and rusty stovepipe that protruded from the side of the hut, there issued the wood smoke which was being wafted down the ravine, and which had drawn Leslie's attention to the place.

At the right of the enclosure was a long, low shed, open on one side and built from wide, rough, unpainted boards. This was evidently intended to quarter the horses of pilgrims as well as the pilgrims themselves, for rings were fastened at frequent intervals along the back wall.

The men tethered their horses and busied themselves with opening packs, preparing breakfast, and pitching tents, while Leslie and José went up to the hut of the anchorite. It was evident that he had heard their arrival, for a bent figure, attired in a ragged robe of rusty brown and leaning on a staff, emerged from the doorway and hobbled forward to meet them. As he drew near, Leslie saw a face that was seamed, wrinkled and emaciated above an unkempt gray beard.

The hermit paused before them and leaned on his staff.

"God bless you, my sons," he mumbled, with the peculiar sibilant enunciation that invariably denotes the paucity or absence of teeth. "You have come from my friend, Señor Hernandez, I presume. And you have passed the demons unscathed. *Deo gracias.*"

"Unscathed thus far, Tio Luis," replied José. "This is Señor Leslie, the great Devil-Fighter, who has come to rid us of the demons that haunt this vicinity."

"*Bueno!* We have need of him, and our prayers for his safety and success will go with him on his dangerous mission. But come within and join me at breakfast if you can do with my humble fare."

They accompanied the aged hermit to the door of the hut, where he politely stood aside and bade them enter.

"All that you see is yours, my sons," he said as he followed them into the small front room. "Excuse me while I go into the kitchen to see about breakfast."

He hobbled through a curtained doorway into the rear room, and Leslie heard him puttering about to the accompanying clatter of pans and crockery.

José unslung his carbine, stood it in a corner, and flung himself into one of the chairs beside the bare table that stood in the center of the room.

"*Huy,* but I am tired," he grunted. "It has been a strenuous night, *señor.*"

Leslie politely agreed with him, disposed of his own carbine, and took a chair on the other side of the table. While he waited for the puttering anchorite he glanced around the room. The furnishings were meager enough

to suit the taste of the most humble of lay brothers; a low cot covered by a frowsy blanket, four crude chairs, and the table at which they sat, its bare top stained with food and beverages. Beneath the single window there stood a small, crudely constructed pulpit on which lay a book, evidently a missal. Both pulpit and book were covered with much dust, evidence that they had known little if any use since the passing of Father Salvador. The plastered walls were cracked, grimy, and festooned with cobwebs.

Presently the Anciano limped through the curtained doorway. Again apologizing for the meanness of the fare, he set before them some boiled rice, a huge chunk of honeycomb, and hot chocolate.

After consulting with José and the anchorite, Leslie decided to post two guards at each end of the pass for the morning, do a little exploring on his own account, and permit the other men to rest, relieving the guards at noon.

Accordingly, he set out after breakfast, resolved to make a minute examination of the scene of the tragedy enacted the night before, hoping that the morning sunlight might reveal some clue overlooked in his search by flashlight.

Arriving at the place where the foolhardy rider had been beheaded, he dismounted and scanned every foot of the ground in the vicinity. The road, at that point, was less than ten feet in width. On one side the cliff rose almost perpendicularly to a height of nearly twenty-five feet, and appeared unscalable. On the other, the stony ground sloped sharply to the water's edge. Some thirty feet from the point where the blood spots began, a clump of stunted willows had found foothold in the rocky bank. Leslie peered into these with a view to ascertaining whether or not they had been used for purposes of ambush, then uttered a cry of surprize at sight of a bloodstained object hanging among them. He drew it forth and recognized it instantly as the outer edge of a broad-brimmed sombrero. It appeared to have been cut from the hat by a very keen instrument, not in the form of a circle or oval, but more like an irregular hexagon, no two lines being equal but all lines straight, or nearly so. He noticed, also, that it was creased at each point where two straight cuts joined. An examination of the bushes revealed the fact that they had not been used as a hiding-place by a human being.

Puzzled, Leslie hung the blood-caked relic over his saddle-horn, mounted, and rode back to camp.

His men, with the exception of one who had been left on guard by José, were sleeping beneath the tents, the walls of which had been raised to admit the breeze. The guard took charge of his horse and looked curiously at the bloody hat-brim which Leslie removed from the saddle-horn.

He started for the hut of the hermit, intending to show his find to that individual, then paused as the sudden clatter of hoofbeats came from behind him.

Turning, he beheld one of his men emerging from the ravine. The fellow dismounted and ran to where he was standing, fear and horror written on his bronzed features. So great was his agitation that, although his lips worked spasmodically, he was unable to speak.

"Well, what is it?" snapped Leslie. "Have you lost your voice?"

The man crossed himself and muttered beneath his breath.

"Maria *Madre* preserve us!" he gasped. "We are all doomed men."

"But how? Speak to the point."

"The demons! They kill in broad daylight now!"

"Where? Who?"

"We were standing guard at the north end of the pass, Miguel and I. They have beheaded Miguel!"

"What did *they* look like?"

"I did not see them, *señor*."

"What? Your comrade slain before your eyes and you could not see the murderers?"

"Not before my eyes, *señor*. I—that is——"

"You were sleeping, I suppose, on duty."

The fellow hung his head.

"We were very tired, Miguel and I, after the night's vigil. Things were so peaceful that we decided there could be no harm in our snatching a little sleep, one at a time. I stood guard for two hours while Miguel slept. Then he mounted guard, but it seemed I had scarcely closed my eyes before I heard him utter a choking cry. I caught up my carbine and leaped instantly to my feet. Before my eyes the headless body of my comrade slipped from his saddle, and at the same moment I heard the whir of wings above my head! Although I looked upward instantly, I saw nothing!"

"This whir of wings. Was it loud like the roar of an airplane?"

"No, *señor*. It had a much quieter tone, like the whistle of a large bird's pinions."

"What has happened, my sons?"

Wheeling, Leslie saw the Anciano, who had hobbled up unnoticed, behind him.

6

LESLIE explained the situation to the hermit and showed him the hat-brim he had found.

"Lend us the wisdom of your years, Tio Luis," he requested. "This is the most singular as well as the most hellish thing I have ever encountered. What do you make of it?"

The old man turned the gruesome relic in his bony hands, squinting at it with watery eyes.

"A man beheaded, the whir of wings—and this." He shook his head, handed the thing back to Leslie, and crossed himself. "I fear you are playing with fire that will destroy you, my sons. We have a saying: 'He must have iron fingers who would flay the devil.' "

"We also have a saying that is apt, Tio Luis," Leslie replied. " 'Give the devil rope enough and he'll hang himself.' " He turned to the guard. "Saddle my horse, Pedro, and arouse José. We'll see if the devil has left any more souvenirs."

Once more the anchorite shook his grizzled head.

" 'He was slain who had warning, not he who took it,' " he quoted. "You have my sympathy, my son—that and my prayers."

"The former is premature, but for the latter I thank you," replied Leslie. "Ready, Pedro?"

"*Si, señor*. José will be out in a moment. He is pulling on his boots."

José emerged from the tent as Leslie started toward the horses. Together, they mounted and rode down the ravine.

They covered the half-mile to the north end of the canyon at a brisk gallop. The body of the slain man lay sprawled in the middle of the road, and his patient horse stood near by, apparently not greatly frightened by the diabolical presence which had given Pedro so much alarm.

Dismounting, both men looked carefully for tracks of the slayer, but their search was as fruitless as before. Nor was there a cut hat-brim, such as Leslie had found on the scene of the last tragedy.

Compelled at last to give up their hopeless search, they tied the body of Miguel across his saddle and took it back to camp. Leslie directed that the corpse be rolled in an extra tent-fly and sent to Tlaxpam with one of the men. Then he detailed two guards for the north end of the pass and two to relieve those at the south end, warning them to take heed from the death of Miguel and do no sleeping on duty. These matters attended to, he instructed the camp guard to call

him before sundown, and retired to his tent for a much-needed rest.

It seemed to Leslie that he had not slept more than fifteen minutes when he was aroused by a tug at his blanket. Opening his eyes, he saw José standing over him.

"The sun nears the horizon, *señor*," he said, "and the Anciano has bidden us to sup with him. Some pilgrims visited the shrine this afternoon and left gifts for the holy man. Among them were a pullet and a bottle of wine he desires to share with us."

"Pilgrims? Who were they?"

"Only two *peóns* with their wives. They came here on donkeys from a hacienda near Tlaxpam, and departed after they had bathed in the sacred pool and deposited their gifts."

"I see. Tell the Anciano we accept with gratitude. A pullet and a bottle of wine will be preferable to *tasajo* and *frijoles*. I'll be along in a few minutes."

José departed, and Leslie pulled on his boots. Then he buckled his two gun-belts about him and stepped out of the tent, intending to wash for dinner at the spring. His men were squatting or lying around their cooking-fires, preparing their evening meal.

As he rounded the last of the tents he saw a man disrobing beside the sacred pool. On closer approach he recognized Pedro.

"What's the matter? Sick?" he inquired.

"A bath in the pool at sunset is said to cure boils," replied the Mexican, stripping off his shirt. "I have two on my back, *señor*."

"At sunset? I didn't know the time made any difference."

"Oh, but it does, *señor*. The Anciano told me so himself."

Walking past the image of St. Anthony, Leslie laved his face and hands in the bubbling spring. Then, much refreshed, he started for the hermit's hut. The sun was sinking, and he heard the splashing of Pedro as the lad entered the pool.

Rounding the corner of the hut, Leslie came upon José seated on the doorstep smoking a husk cigarette. In the kitchen he heard the anchorite bustling about among his pots and pans. The table was set and graced by a wide, wicker-covered bottle with a long neck.

"How is your appetite, José?" he asked.

"Like that of a wolf, *señor*. And yours?"

"Like that of a pack of wolves. I'm accustomed to eating lunch, but I've been too busy today."

At the sound of their voices the hermit limped out from the kitchen.

"Come in, my sons," he said. "Be seated and sample this wine with me while the pullet reaches the right degree of tenderness."

They obeyed his invitation with alacrity.

"This is really an imposition, Tio Luis," said Leslie as the old man filled their glasses, "but I couldn't resist. I promise you a dozen pullets and a dozen bottles to replace these when I get back to Tlaxpam."

"I, also," cried José, eagerly reaching for his glass. "We are eternally indebted to you. I propose the health of our host, *señor*."

The hermit bowed, smiled, sipped his wine, and rose. "I must look to our food," he said.

The two men sipped their wine and discussed the events of the day. Presently José emptied his glass and refilled it.

Then the anchorite entered again. In one hand he bore a large pot from which savory odors exuded. In the other he carried a deep plate over which a bowl had been inverted. Placing pot and plate on the table, he lifted the bowl.

"Chicken and chile!" cried José. "Food for a king."

"And *tortillas!*" exclaimed Leslie. "Did you bake them yourself?"

His words were followed by a shout from outside—then an excited babel of voices.

Leslie put down his glass and rushed out the door. He saw a man standing beside the sacred pool. The others, aroused from their places beside the campfires, were running toward their companion. He joined the rush to the pool and saw, in a moment, the cause of the commotion. A half-clothed, headless body with arms outstretched lay on the very rim of the pool.

"It is Pedro!" a man cried. "The demons have slain Pedro!"

"They will slay us all if we remain," said another. "I'm going back to Tlaxpam."

"And I."

"And I."

José came running.

"What has happened, *señor*?" he asked, his tongue a bit thickened by wine.

"We've lost another man." Leslie produced his flashlight and snapped it on. "See if you can quiet these sniveling cowards while I have a look around."

7

While José, rendered eloquent and perhaps more fearless by the wine he had consumed, sought to quiet the fears of his comrades, Leslie made a thorough examination of the body. He judged from its position that Pedro had been seated on the rim of the pool with his back to the image, dressing, when the crime occurred. The other men, occupied with their evening meal, would not have seen the attack because of the tents intervening between the cooking-fires and the pool.

Using the jutting rocks for feet and hands, he next climbed the steep hillside at the left of the image, circled the point over the niche, and descended on the right side, searching every inch of the way with his flashlight. As there were no tracks other than those he had made himself, he concluded that the attack had not come from above. It was useless to look for tracks on the hard-packed ground around the pool, and there seemed to be no other clues.

His men, he noticed, were gathered in a small group around the loquacious José, and he was about to snap off his flashlight and go to the guide's assistance when the white circle fell on something that gave him pause. It was a large drop of blood on the stone floor of the niche, and directly in front of the image. With a low cry of surprize he bent over to examine it, then leaped up and whirled about, gun in hand, at the sound of a footfall behind him. He returned the weapon to its holster with a nervous laugh as he saw the Anciano standing there, peering at him with his little watery eyes.

"Sorry, Tio Luis," he apologized, "but you gave me a deuce of a start."

"Do not mention it, my son," replied the hermit. "I should have announced my coming at a time like this. So the demons have profaned the sacred pool! Now, indeed, will the wrath of God smite them. You have found a clue?"

"Only a drop of the blood on the floor of the niche. It has some significance, of course—but what? How do you suppose this blood was dropped clear over here, a full ten feet from the body? And there are no blood-spots between, other than those around the body itself."

"It is as mysterious as all else that has happened. We have a saying: 'The devil lurks behind the cross,' and if this be true he would not hesitate to conceal himself in a shrine of St. Anthony."

"That explanation may suffice for you, but it does not satisfy me," replied Leslie. Then, noticing that some of his men were saddling their horses, he hurried to the assistance of José, whose alcoholic eloquence had apparently not been sufficient to deter

them from their avowed purpose of returning to Tlaxpam.

"Get down, *hombre!*" he roared, addressing a man who had already mounted. The fellow hesitated, then did as he was bidden. He swung on the others. "What does this mean? Are you women in the uniforms of fighters?"

"We can not fight the devil," one man replied.

"We shall only lose our lives and accomplish nothing by remaining," said another. "Come with us, *señor.*"

Leslie laughed.

"Go, then, cowards," he retorted. "Go back to Don Arturo and tell him you are afraid—that you are too white-livered to remain and avenge the death of your comrades. I'll stay and fight these murderers alone."

"Not alone, *señor,*" said José. "I remain with you." He appealed again to the men. "The great Devil-Fighter stays," he said, "to deal death to those who have slain our comrades. Boon companions we have been for many years, we and those of us who have died for our cause. The Devil-Fighter, whom we have only known since yesterday—who has only known Pedro and Miguel a few hours—remains to avenge them. Is there one among us who can do less?"

"He is right," said the man who had just dismounted. "I remain."

"My duty is plain," said another. "I remain also."

"And I."

"And I."

"*Viva* Leslie! Hurrah for the great Devil-Fighter!"

Thus the mutiny was quelled and order restored.

In a trice, José had set them at various tasks, knowing full well that if their hands were occupied they would have less time for fearful speculations. The body of Pedro was wrapped and swung from the rafters of the shed. The watch-fires were replenished so that most of the camp was illuminated, and men were sent to relieve the guards at the ends of the canyon.

In order to hearten his men further, Leslie decided to ride down with the two who were to take the post nearest Tlaxpam. Nothing untoward occurring after an hour's vigil with these two, he enjoined them to be on their guard and rode away to see how the two at the other end of the canyon were getting along.

He had passed the camp and was rounding the next curve at a slow canter, wrapped in meditation as he pondered the terrible and amazing events of the last twenty-four hours, when with startling suddenness there came a sound resembling the whistle of huge pinions, directly above his head.

There was no time to think—yet he acted, by instinct rather than by reason. With catlike quickness he hurled himself sideways and hung, Indian fashion, supported by one stirrup and the neck of the pony. Something struck heavily on the saddle and he heard a sharp metallic click. Then the frightened animal bounded forward so suddenly that he nearly lost his hold. Deft horseman that Leslie was, he managed to regain his seat before much ground had been covered, but nearly lost his balance in doing so, because when he reached for the saddle-horn he grasped only empty air.

Pulling the pony to a halt he dismounted, unslung his carbine, and waited for a new attack. Five minutes elapsed—ten—fifteen, yet he saw nothing save the rugged canyon bathed in the moonlight, and heard only the chirruping serenade of insects and the occasional call of a night bird.

Holding the carbine in his left hand, he felt the front of the saddle with his right. The horn, he discovered, had been sheared away smoothly and completely. Thus, he was certain, would his head have been sheared

from his shoulders had he kept his seat a fraction of a second longer when that awful, death-dealing thing had hurtled down at him from a clear sky.

And the thing itself. What was it? Something conceived by man, he felt sure—for Leslie was not superstitious—yet designed with such diabolical cleverness as to kill with almost superhuman accuracy and leave no clue that would hint at its nature or *modus operandi*.

Convinced, at length, that he could not further his cause by remaining longer, Leslie removed his broad Stetson and fastened it to the saddle-ring with the chin-strap. Then he mounted with a better view of the air above his head and rode, carbine in hand, to where the two guards were posted. Finding that they had nothing to report, he left them with a warning to maintain the utmost vigilance, and rode slowly back toward the camp. While he rode, albeit he kept a weather eye for danger, he was thinking, and to such purpose that when he reached camp a new plan had completely formed in his mind. He greeted José with a disconcerting smile as that worthy came out to meet him.

8

"THE *señor* is amused?" José answered the smile of Leslie with a flash of his white teeth. "Perhaps he has discovered something."

"Nothing new, José," Leslie replied. "Just thought of a new scheme to work on this so-called 'devil'."

"And the scheme?"

"I'll show you in a minute. Go and ask Tio Luis if we may tear three or four boards off his horse-shed."

"Tio Luis retired for the night shortly after you left. Should we disturb him for such a trifle?"

"No, let him sleep, but bring four boards into my tent, a riata, and a couple of good sharp machetes. Don't make any more noise than necessary, and say nothing about this to the others."

"*Si, señor.*"

As soon as José departed to do his bidding, Leslie went behind the tents and pulled a huge armful of grass. With this he entered the rear of his own tent, deposited it on the floor, and lighted his lantern. Then he opened one of his saddle-bags and took therefrom a complete suit of cowboy attire.

José returned in a trice with the boards and the machetes.

"Now bring me a saddle," Leslie ordered.

When José got back with the saddle he found the American industriously hewing one of the broad boards with a machete. The wood was partly softened by dry rot, though firm enough not to crumble, and was consequently easily shaped with the keen blade.

Leslie finished this board, which was about six feet in length, and handed it to José.

"Cut me another the same shape," he said.

José worked swiftly, but stole a curious glance at Leslie from time to time as the latter cut one of the remaining boards into four pieces, the other into two, and then proceeded to cut holes and notches in them.

The boards shaped, Leslie cut the riata, a piece at a time, and began lashing the boards together, using the notches and holes for the purpose. When José saw a figure resembling the frame of a scarecrow beginning to take shape he grinned broadly.

"*Por Dios!*" he cried. "Do you expect to fool the devil with so simple a thing?"

"Wait until it's finished," Leslie answered, drawing the trousers and boots over the frame and stuffing them with grass. "Bring a horse around behind my tent while I finish this work of art."

His own effigy completed to his

satisfaction, Leslie clapped his Stetson over the head and lashed the thing to the saddle with what was left of the riata. Then he lifted the rear tent-flap and passed it through to the waiting José. Together they placed the dummy on the back of the surprized and annoyed pony, and stood back to view their handiwork.

"*Viva!*" exclaimed José. "Your double sits the horse, *señor.*"

"Now for the rest of my plan," said Leslie. "I want you to saddle another horse and lead this one, giving it about twenty feet of rope. Ride very slowly up and down the canyon until the attack occurs. If we may judge by our previous experience it is almost sure to come. The enemy will attack the rear man for two reasons. One is that an attack on the man in front could be seen and perhaps frustrated by the man in the rear, and the other is that the thing looks like me in the moonlight and I have reason to believe my head would be preferred as a souvenir above all others in this company.

"While you are walking your horses on the trail below I'll follow at a distance of about a hundred yards on the cliff above. I have a pair of moccasins here that will eliminate any clatter I might make with boots and spurs, and will thus have a chance to view the attack from above while you look on from below."

"*Cáspita!* Now we will get this devil, for sure."

"I hope so. Go and saddle up while I put on my moccasins. If we have any traitors in camp they will see us ride away together. If not, there will be no harm in temporarily deceiving them. I'll throw the end of the lead rope to you from behind the tent when you're ready to start. Then I can hike over to the top of the cliff and wait for you."

As José, some moments later, rode down the arroyo apparently followed by the American, Leslie stood and viewed his handiwork with pardonable pride for a moment, then scurried up to the top of the cliff and waited for the guide to appear below him.

It was not long before what looked for all the world like two horsemen riding in single file emerged from the arroyo and started toward Tlaxpam at a leisurely pace. Following his preconceived plan, Leslie kept about three hundred feet behind them on the cliff top, his moccasined feet making no sound, his carbine held ready for action.

A full quarter of a mile had been covered when Leslie's quick eye caught the movement of a shadowy form near a clump of brush at his right. It disappeared in the bushes almost instantly, and he paused, breathlessly awaiting its reappearance. The view had been so indistinct that he was not sure whether it had been a man or an animal.

After several minutes of waiting, he grew impatient and had just decided to explore the bushes where the apparition had dropped out of sight, when he saw it again, this time fully three hundred yards away and just on the brink of the cliff. It was undeniably a man, though grotesquely shaped, a man with what looked like a huge hump on his back. As he looked, he realized that the prowler was directly above the point where José and his own effigy would be, the guide having made considerable progress while he had been waiting for the reappearance of the figure.

Dismayed at this unforeseen circumstance that had caused him to lag so far behind the guide, Leslie rushed forward. As he did so, he was amazed to see the hump suddenly detach itself from the back of the man—no longer a hump, but something about the size of a peck measure. It was raised aloft, then hurled downward over the side of the cliff. Leslie halted and brought his carbine to his shoulder, but at this moment his quarry suddenly dropped from sight.

Cursing his own slowness, he again hurried forward, stepped into an unseen crevice, and fell sprawling, cutting his hands painfully on the sharp stones. As if in mirth at his discomfiture there came to him the raucous echoes of hideous, demoniac laughter.

He scrambled to his feet, caught a glimpse of the humpbacked figure again, and fired. Simultaneously with the crack of his rifle the figure dropped out of sight. Again he ran forward, his rifle held in readiness, straining his eyes in all directions for another sight of his quarry. He had almost come upon the spot where he judged the marauder had stood, when he caught the movement of something in the shrubbery, this time a full hundred feet back from the cliff. Again he fired and rushed forward, convinced that his bullet had found its mark. It seemed, however, that he was doomed to disappointment, for a thorough search of the shrubbery in and around the spot revealed nothing.

Returning to the brink of the cliff he took the precaution to call out before showing himself.

"José."

"*Que gente?*"

"I am Leslie. Do not shoot."

"Very well, *señor.*"

Looking over the cliff, Leslie saw that his effigy had been decapitated, even as he had expected. It was well, too, that he had had the forethought to call out, as José had dismounted and was standing behind his pony, his carbine pointing across the saddle.

"Did you see it, José?" he asked.

"No, *señor,* but I heard it. Praise God it struck as you expected."

"So I see," replied Leslie, regarding the headless effigy, "but unfortunately I wasn't on the job to strike as *I* expected. I may as well ride back to camp now and think up a new scheme. This one won't work again. I'll keep to the cliff above you in case of another attack."

"Very well, *señor.*"

BACK at camp, Leslie's men greeted him with a flood of questions, for they had heard the sound of his carbine. The appearance of José leading the horse which bore the headless effigy increased the amazement of the Mexicans, and Leslie left the task of explaining to the guide while he sat down on his cot to smoke a cigarette and think out the situation. Hearing laughter from the men outside as José told of the ruse, he decided that the salutary effect on them had been worth the effort, even though he had not succeeded in his purpose.

His cigarette finished, he ground it into the dirt with his heel and paced back and forth in the tent. As he was preoccupied with his efforts to think out a new plan of campaign, it was some time before he noticed that it was growing lighter outside. He stepped out, and found that most of the men had rolled themselves in their blankets to rest after the night's vigil. Two stood guard, however, and José squatted beside a smoldering fire, heating a pot of chocolate.

He was about to join the latter beside the fire when he noticed smoke issuing from the stovepipe that protruded from the side of the Anciano's hut. Evidently the hermit was an early riser. Perhaps, thought Leslie, he could offer a suggestion for the next move in the campaign. At any rate, he should be told about the boards and the effigy.

Going to the hut, Leslie rapped smartly on the door. There was no response. He rapped again. Still no response. Puzzled, he swung it open and entered. Seeing no one, he walked into the kitchen. There was nobody in sight, and no sign of a fire in the stove. Yet he had, just a moment before, seen smoke issuing from the stovepipe.

Confronted with this paradoxical situation, he stepped forward and felt the pipe. It was quite warm—

almost hot. He looked out the small window and saw that smoke was billowing from the pipe even more thickly than before. This led him to make an examination of the stove. One end, he now noticed, abutted against the adobe wall at the rear of the hut. He raised a lid, and a cloud of smoke whirled up into his face. Reaching inside the stove, he explored with his hand, and found that it was coming through a pipe which connected the end of the stove with the adobe wall.

If this told him anything, it was that someone had built a fire on the other side of the wall. But how had he got there? The hillside had been partly dug away when the hut was built. Evidently the digging had been deeper than appeared on the surface. He made a quick examination of the rear wall. All appeared to be solid adobe with the exception of a row of shelves containing canned goods, cooking-utensils, and other things, which occupied one side. These were of wood, apparently built against the adobe, yet they were his only hope. He pulled on the side nearest him, but it was apparently quite firm. Pushing brought the same result. Then he tried pulling the other side, and his heart gave a sudden jump as it gave and swung toward him. The shelving, he now saw, was nailed to a heavy oaken door with concealed hinges, the front of which was plastered with adobe.

A dark passageway yawned before him. He drew a revolver, stepped in, and pulled the door shut after him.

Pausing for a moment to accustom his eyes to the semi-darkness, he noticed that what light there was came to him from around a curve in the passageway. It was of reddish hue, and flickered weirdly in the gloom. As he advanced he noticed that the floor slanted abruptly downward.

He rounded the curve in the passageway, his moccasined feet making no sound, then came to a sudden halt; for not ten feet ahead was a sight that made his flesh creep—a grinning human skull, hovering with no apparent support, in midair. The fleshless features seemed to quiver with some ghoulish emotion, the eyeless sockets to sparkle with malignant intensity.

Conquering his repugnance, Leslie again advanced, and discovered that the skull was hung on a thin, black, hence invisible, wire just at the entrance of a square room. The apparent motion of the bony features was caused by the flickering light of a fire that crackled in a fireplace cut into one wall, and over which a huge black cauldron bubbled.

Stepping past the skull, Leslie was confronted by a charnel array that rivaled, if it did not exactly resemble, the most ghastly corners of the Catacombs. He was surrounded by skulls, some dangling from the ceiling rafters on wires of various lengths, some grinning down at him from the wall where they were arranged in divers geometric patterns, and the rest piled in a grim funebral pyramid in the center of the floor.

Feeling sure there was someone near by, Leslie looked carefully about him. There were two entrances to the chamber, the one by which he had come, and another in the opposite side of the room. After investigating the second opening, which led into a dark runway, he walked to the fireplace, curious to know what was being cooked in the kettle.

Peering over, he saw a seething mass of liquid with a dark spot in the center. Then the dark spot moved—it was black hair—and the ghastly dead face of Pedro, turning with the movement of the water, looked up at him. Beneath it, another head was slowly turning toward him—the head of Miguel. He drew back, sickened and horrified, then paused, listening in-

tently. Distinctly, he heard the sound of footsteps in the passageway he had not yet explored.

With catlike quickness, he bounded noiselessly into the passageway by which he had come, and trusting to the comparative darkness for concealment he waited a few feet from the opening.

Prepared as he was for strange sights, Leslie gasped in amazement at the weird figure that entered—a tall, gaunt being, attired from head to foot in tight-fitting scarlet, and wearing a Mephistophelian hood and mask. As the man advanced to the center of the room with the springy tread of an athlete, Leslie saw that he was well muscled, and would make no mean antagonist in a rough-and-tumble fight. In his right hand he held a coiled rope, one end of which extended over his shoulder. He turned and eased a burden to the floor—a queer-looking contrivance that was fastened to the other end of the rope. It was cubical in shape, each dimension being about twelve inches, and was apparently made of steel. Projecting from the bottom on each of two opposite sides were three stout bars about four inches in length. Between each middle bar and corresponding end bar was stretched a powerful steel spring. The rope was fastened to an iron ring riveted near the bottom.

The demoniac figure knelt on the floor beside the thing and fondled it as one might a faithful dog. Then there issued from behind the hideous mask a horrid peal of laughter that caused cold chills to run up and down the spine of the American, for it was the same sound he had twice heard before, and each time after a headless victim had been found on the road.

The maniac—for such he appeared to be—continued to stroke the thing that lay on the floor before him.

"You have done well, *degollador mio,*" he said. "Heh, heh, heh, my little one, you have done famously. Never was there a headsman like you. I swear it. Three heads between two suns! *Cáspita!* If the harvest continues thus, our vow will soon be fulfilled. Had that cursed Gringo not evaded us with his clever tricks we should have had four, but never mind, my pretty. I promise that you shall taste his cursed heretic blood ere another sun has set. Heh, heh, heh! We will fool this self-styled 'Devil-Fighter,' my little one. We will send him to try conclusions with Sátanas and his imps. But we must rest ere that is done, so now to business."

So saying, he half raised one end of the contrivance and pressed his knee against it. Then he grasped the two middle projecting bars and pulled them toward him with some difficulty because of the resistance of the powerful springs. At the sound of a sharp click, he released his hold and the bars remained where he had left them, the springs now drawn taut the entire length of the sides. He took hold of the ring, and gave the whole thing a shake. A gory head rolled out upon the floor, and Leslie instantly recognized the face of another of his guards, probably caught napping in the early morning hours.

Seizing it by the hair, the maniac carried it to the kettle and dropped it into the boiling water. Then, drawing a heavy machete from his sash, he prodded within the kettle, apparently testing the tenderness of the others.

Leslie, feeling that the time for action was at hand, stepped softly into the room, his six-shooter ready for action. The killer stood with his back toward him, still prodding the grisly contents of the kettle, but, loathsome and deserving of death though he was, Leslie could not shoot him down in cold blood.

"Surrender or die," he shouted.

The maniac swung around, and

with the same movement, hurled the heavy machete straight for the breast of the American.

10

LESLIE had no time to dodge the keen blade of the killer that was hurtling toward his heart. He could not possibly have moved his body fast enough. He could move his hands, however, with lightninglike rapidity, or he would never have lived to earn the title of "Two-Gun Bart." With a movement quicker than eye could follow, he parried the blade with the barrel of his six-shooter, then covered his enemy once more as the weapon clattered to the floor.

"Your last chance, *hombre,*" he roared, bounding forward. "Do you surrender?"

"I yield, *señor.* You see I am unarmed. What would you?"

"First remove that mask, that I may see what servant of Satan hides behind his features."

"But, *señor*——"

"Remove it, I say!" He jammed his gun into the midriff of the killer.

"Let me go. I will pay you well—make you rich. The government offered you twenty thousand pesos. I will double it. I will——"

"Dog!" With a sweep of his free hand Leslie tore the mask away. As he did so, a long, tangled beard tumbled down over the scarlet breast and the little watery eyes of the Anciano looked into his! Then the straight back bent, the shoulders assumed a familiar droop, and the voice became a sibilant whine.

"Mercy, good *señor, en el nombre de Dios*! Would you slay a helpless old man?"

"A cold-blooded murderer deserves no pity."

"But I was justified. I swear it. Give me a chance to explain."

"You couldn't possibly be justified, but if you are anxious to talk I'll listen for a little while."

"*Gracias, señor.* Do you know who and what I really am?"

"I know you as Tio Luis, the Anciano, and recently, as Tio Luis, the murderer. Anything else could matter but little."

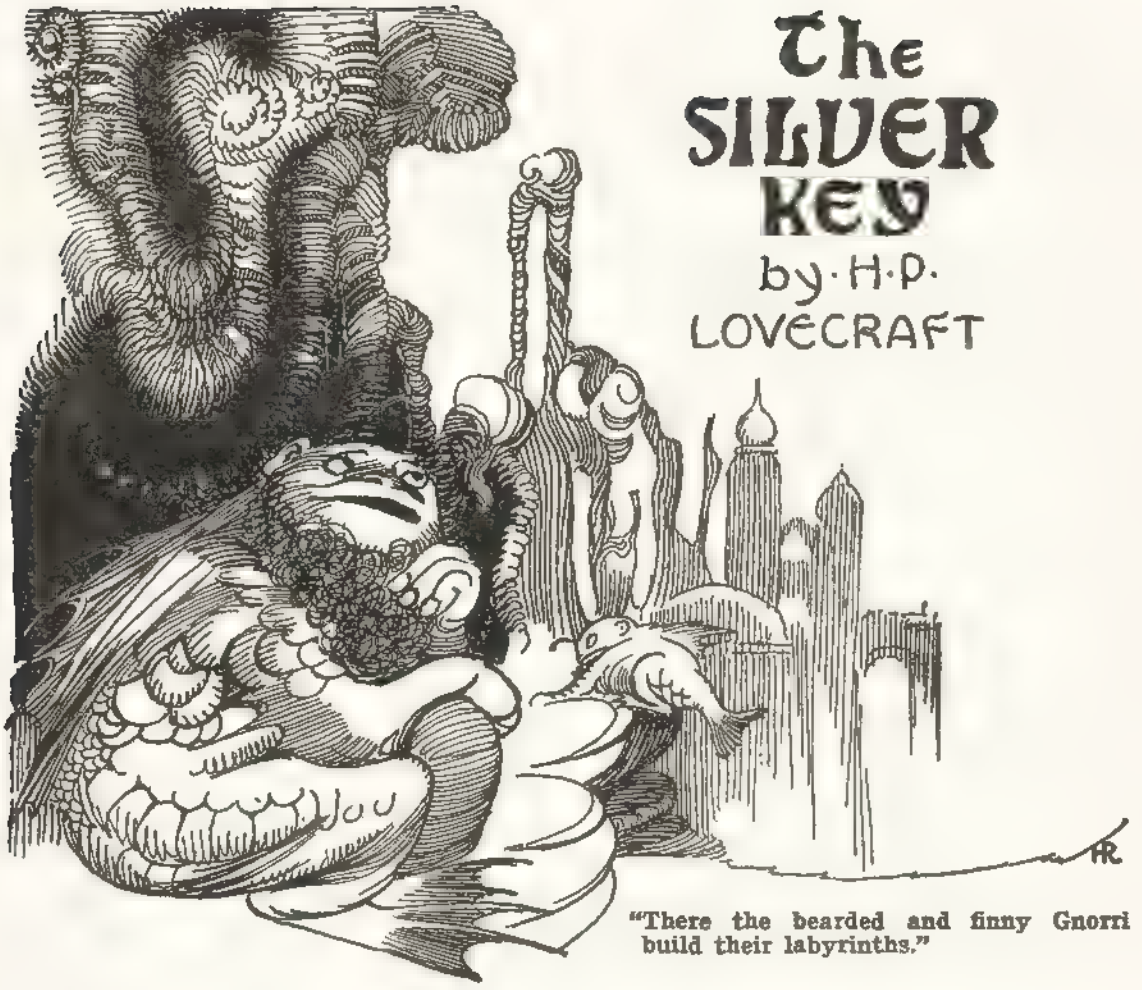
"Of that you shall judge. My name is not Luis at all, but Tomas Perez. Neither am I of common mestizo stock, as you no doubt suppose. Through no fault of my own there flows in my veins enough Spanish blood to lighten the color of my skin and give me this beard, yet my people were Yaquis, and I am one of them, heart and soul.

"No doubt you have heard or read the sad history of my people. If you have not, then picture a tribe, a nation, peace-loving, hard-working tillers of the soil, oppressed for hundreds of years by every form of outrageous tyranny known to man, yet bearing it all with meekness, striving to overcome evil with good. Such was the nation of the Yaquis.

"Not content with squeezing the last peso from my people by unjust taxation, the government presently began the confiscation of our lands. A few of our sturdier souls rebelled and were promptly massacred. Then came the order for wholesale deportation. My thrifty father had acquired a small but fertile farm in the rich Sonora Valley. With the help of my mother, brother, sister and self, he had been able to eke out a meager existence and meet the extortionate demands of the tax collectors. One day the *Rurales* came with orders for the confiscation of our farm, and our deportation. We had done nothing wrong, yet we were Yaquis. That was enough for the government.

"A dashing young lieutenant was in command. My sister was pretty, and after he had ordered his men to drive us down the road like sheep, he bade her remain. I never saw her after that. With thousands of others

(Continued on page 140)



The SILVER KEY

by H.P. LOVECRAFT

"There the bearded and finny Gnorri build their labyrinths."

WHEN Randolph Carter was thirty he lost the key to the gate of dreams. Prior to that time he had made up for the prosiness of life by nightly excursions to strange and ancient cities beyond space, and lovely, unbelievable garden lands across ethereal seas; but as middle age hardened upon him he felt these liberties slipping away little by little, until at last he was cut off altogether. No more could his galleys sail up the river Oukranos past the gilded spires of Thran, or his elephant caravans tramp through perfumed jungles in Kled, where forgotten palaces with veined ivory columns sleep lovely and unbroken under the moon.

He had read too much of things as they are, and talked with too many people. Well-meaning philosophers had taught him to look into the logical relations of things, and analyze the processes which shaped his thoughts and fancies. Wonder had gone away, and he had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreamings, and no cause to value the one above the other. Custom had dinned into his ears a superstitious reverence for that which tangibly and physically exists, and had made him secretly ashamed to dwell in visions. Wise men told him his simple fancies were inane and

childish, and he believed it because he could see that they might easily be so. What he failed to recall was that the deeds of reality are just as inane and childish, and even more absurd because their actors persist in fancying them full of meaning and purpose as the blind purpose grinds aimlessly on from nothing to something back to nothing again, neither heeding nor knowing the wishes or existence of the minds that flicker for a second now and then in the darkness.

They had chained him down to things that are, and had then explained the workings of those things till mystery had gone out of the world. When he complained, and longed to escape into twilight realms where magic molded all the little vivid fragments and prized associations of his mind into vistas of breathless expectancy and unquenchable delight, they turned him instead toward the new-found prodigies of science, bidding him find wonder in the atom's vortex and mystery in the sky's dimensions. And when he had failed to find these boons in things whose laws are known and measurable, they told him he lacked imagination, and was immature because he preferred dream-illusions to the illusions of our physical creation.

So Carter had tried to do as others did, and pretended that the common events and emotions of earthy minds were more important than the fantasies of rare and delicate souls. He did not dissent when they told him that the animal pain of a stuck pig or dyspeptic plowman in real life is a greater thing than the peerless beauty of Narath with its hundred carven gates and domes of chalcedony, which he dimly remembered from his dreams; and under their guidance he cultivated a painstaking sense of pity and tragedy.

Once in a while, though, he could not help seeing how shallow, fickle, and meaningless all human aspirations are, and how emptily our real impulses contrast with those pompous ideals we profess to hold. Then he would have recourse to the polite laughter they had taught him to use against the extravagance and artificiality of dreams; for he saw that the daily life of our world is every inch as extravagant and artificial, and far less worthy of respect because of its poverty in beauty and its silly reluctance to admit its own lack of reason and purpose. In this way he became a kind of humorist, for he did not see that even humor is empty in a mindless universe devoid of any true standard of consistency or inconsistency.

In the first days of his bondage he had turned to the gentle churchly faith endeared to him by the naïve trust of his fathers, for thence stretched mystic avenues which seemed to promise escape from life. Only on closer view did he mark the starved fancy and beauty, the stale and prosy triteness, and the owlish gravity and grotesque claims of solid truth which reigned boresomely and overwhelmingly among most of its professors; or feel to the full the awkwardness with which it sought to keep alive as literal fact the outgrown fears and guesses of a primal race confronting the unknown. It wearied Carter to see how solemnly people tried to make earthly reality out of old myths which every step of their boasted science confuted, and this misplaced seriousness killed the attachment he might have kept for the ancient creeds had they been content to offer the sonorous rites and emotional outlets in their true guise of ethereal fantasy.

But when he came to study those who had thrown off the old myths, he found them even more ugly than those who had not. They did not know that beauty lies in harmony, and that loveliness of life has no standard amidst an aimless cosmos save only its

harmony with the dreams and the feelings which have gone before and blindly molded our little spheres out of the rest of chaos. They did not see that good and evil and beauty and ugliness are only ornamental fruits of perspective, whose sole value lies in their linkage to what chance made our fathers think and feel, and whose fine details are different for every race and culture. Instead, they either denied these things altogether or transferred them to the crude, vague instincts which they shared with the beasts and peasants; so that their lives were dragged malodorously out in pain, ugliness, and disproportion, yet filled with a ludicrous pride at having escaped from something no more unsound than that which still held them. They had traded the false gods of fear and blind piety for those of license and anarchy.

Carter did not taste deeply of these modern freedoms; for their cheapness and squalor sickened a spirit loving beauty alone, while his reason rebelled at the flimsy logic with which their champions tried to gild brute impulse with a sacredness stripped from the idols they had discarded. He saw that most of them, in common with their cast-off priestcraft, could not escape from the delusion that life has a meaning apart from that which men dream into it; and could not lay aside the crude notion of ethics and obligations beyond those of beauty, even when all Nature shrieked of its unconsciousness and impersonal unmorality in the light of their scientific discoveries. Warped and bigoted with preconceived illusions of justice, freedom, and consistency, they cast off the old lore and the old ways with the old beliefs; nor ever stopped to think that that lore and those ways were the sole makers of their present thoughts and judgments, and the sole guides and standards in a meaningless universe without fixed aims or stable points of reference. Having lost these artificial settings, their lives grew void of direction and dramatic interest; till at length they strove to drown their ennui in bustle and pretended usefulness, noise and excitement, barbaric display and animal sensation. When these things palled, disappointed, or grew nauseous through revulsion, they cultivated irony and bitterness, and found fault with the social order. Never could they realize that their brute foundations were as shifting and contradictory as the gods of their elders, and that the satisfaction of one moment is the bane of the next. Calm, lasting beauty comes only in dream, and this solace the world had thrown away when in its worship of the real it threw away the secrets of childhood and innocence.

Amidst this chaos of hollowness and unrest Carter tried to live as befitted a man of keen thought and good heritage. With his dreams fading under the ridicule of the age he could not believe in anything, but the love of harmony kept him close to the ways of his race and station. He walked impassive through the cities of men, and sighed because no vista seemed fully real; because every flash of yellow sunlight on tall roofs and every glimpse of balustraded plazas in the first lamps of evening served only to remind him of dreams he had once known, and to make him homesick for ethereal lands he no longer knew how to find. Travel was only a mockery; and even the Great War stirred him but little, though he served from the first in the Foreign Legion of France. For a while he sought friends, but soon grew weary of the crudeness of their emotions, and the sameness and earthiness of their visions. He felt vaguely glad that all his relatives were distant and out of touch with him, for they could not have understood his mental life. That is, none but his grandfather and

great-uncle Christopher could, and they were long dead.

Then he began once more the writing of books, which he had left off when dreams first failed him. But here, too, was there no satisfaction or fulfilment: for the touch of earth was upon his mind, and he could not think of lovely things as he had done of yore. Ironic humor dragged down all the twilight minarets he reared, and the earthy fear of improbability blasted all the delicate and amazing flowers in his faery gardens. The convention of assumed pity spilt mawkishness on his characters, while the myth of an important reality and significant human events and emotions debased all his high fantasy into thin-veiled allegory and cheap social satire. His new novels were successful as his old ones had never been; and because he knew how empty they must be to please an empty herd, he burned them and ceased his writing. They were very graceful novels, in which he urbanely laughed at the dreams he lightly sketched; but he saw that their sophistication had sapped all their life away.

It was after this that he cultivated deliberate illusion, and dabbled in the notions of the bizarre and the eccentric as an antidote for the commonplace. Most of these, however, soon showed their poverty and barrenness; and he saw that the popular doctrines of occultism are as dry and inflexible as those of science, yet without even the slender palliative of truth to redeem them. Gross stupidity, falsehood, and muddled thinking are not dream; and form no escape from life to a mind trained above their level. So Carter bought stranger books and sought out deeper and more terrible men of fantastic erudition; delving into arcana of consciousness that few have trod, and learning things about the secret pits of life, legend, and immemorial antiquity which disturbed him ever afterward. He decided to live on a rarer plane, and furnished his Boston home to suit his changing moods; one room for each, hung in appropriate colors, furnished with befitting books and objects, and provided with sources of the proper sensations of light, heat, sound, taste, and odor.

Once he heard of a man in the South who was shunned and feared for the blasphemous things he read in prehistoric books and clay tablets smuggled from India and Arabia. Him he visited, living with him and sharing his studies for seven years, till horror overtook them one midnight in an unknown and archaic graveyard, and only one emerged where two had entered. Then he went back to Arkham, the terrible witch-haunted old town of his forefathers in New England, and had experiences in the dark, amidst the hoary willows and tottering gambrel roofs, which made him seal for ever certain pages in the diary of a wild-minded ancestor. But these horrors took him only to the edge of reality, and were not of the true dream country he had known in youth; so that at fifty he despaired of any rest or contentment in a world grown too busy for beauty and too shrewd for dream.

Having perceived at last the hollowness and futility of real things, Carter spent his days in retirement, and in wistful disjointed memories of his dream-filled youth. He thought it rather silly that he bother to keep on living at all, and got from a South American acquaintance a very curious liquid to take him to oblivion without suffering. Inertia and force of habit, however, caused him to defer action; and he lingered indecisively among thoughts of old times, taking down the strange hangings from his walls and refitting the house as it was in his early boyhood—purple panes, Victorian furniture, and all.

With the passage of time he became

almost glad he had lingered, for his relics of youth and his cleavage from the world made life and sophistication seem very distant and unreal; so much so that a touch of magic and expectancy stole back into his nightly slumbers. For years those slumbers had known only such twisted reflections of every-day things as the commonest slumbers know, but now there returned a flicker of something stranger and wilder; something of vaguely awesome immanence which took the form of tensely clear pictures from his childhood days, and made him think of little inconsequential things he had long forgotten. He would often awake calling for his mother and grandfather, both in their graves a quarter of a century.

Then one night his grandfather reminded him of the key. The gray old scholar, as vivid as in life, spoke long and earnestly of their ancient line, and of the strange visions of the delicate and sensitive men who composed it. He spoke of the flame-eyed Crusader who learnt wild secrets of the Saracens that held him captive; and of the first Sir Randolph Carter who studied magic when Elizabeth was queen. He spoke, too, of that Edmund Carter who had just escaped hanging in the Salem witchcraft, and who had placed in an antique box a great silver key handed down from his ancestors. Before Carter awaked, the gentle visitant had told him where to find that box; that carved oak box of archaic wonder whose grotesque lid no hand had raised for two centuries.

In the dust and shadows of the great attic he found it, remote and forgotten at the back of a drawer in a tall chest. It was about a foot square, and its Gothic carvings were so fearful that he did not marvel no person since Edmund Carter had dared open it. It gave forth no noise when shaken, but was mystic with the scent of unremembered spices. That it held a key was indeed only a dim legend, and Randolph Carter's father had never known such a box existed. It was bound in rusty iron, and no means was provided for working the formidable lock. Carter vaguely understood that he would find within it some key to the lost gate of dreams, but of where and how to use it his grandfather had told him nothing.

An old servant forced the carven lid, shaking as he did so at the hideous faces leering from the blackened wood, and at some unplaced familiarity. Inside, wrapped in a discolored parchment, was a huge key of tarnished silver covered with cryptical arabesques; but of any legible explanation there was none. The parchment was voluminous, and held only the strange hieroglyphs of an unknown tongue written with an antique reed. Carter recognized the characters as those he had seen on a certain papyrus scroll belonging to that terrible scholar of the South who had vanished one midnight in a nameless cemetery. The man had always shivered when he read this scroll, and Carter shivered now.

But he cleaned the key, and kept it by him nightly in its aromatic box of ancient oak. His dreams were meanwhile increasing in vividness, and though showing him none of the strange cities and incredible gardens of the old days, were assuming a definite cast whose purpose could not be mistaken. They were calling him back along the years, and with the mingled wills of all his fathers were pulling him toward some hidden and ancestral source. Then he knew he must go into the past and merge himself with old things, and day after day he thought of the hills to the north where haunted Arkham and the rushing Miskatonic and the lonely rustic homestead of his people lay.

IN THE brooding fire of autumn Carter took the old remembered way past graceful lines of rolling

hill and stone-walled meadow, distant vale and hanging woodland, curving road and nestling farmstead, and the crystal windings of the Miskatonic, crossed here and there by rustic bridges of wood or stone. At one bend he saw a group of giant elms among which an ancestor had oddly vanished a century and a half before, and shuddered as the wind blew meaningly through them. Then there was the crumbling farmhouse of old Goody Fowler the witch, with its little evil windows and great roof sloping nearly to the ground on the north side. He speeded up his car as he passed it, and did not slacken till he had mounted the hill where his mother and her fathers before her were born, and where the old white house still looked proudly across the road at the breathlessly lovely panorama of rocky slope and verdant valley, with the distant spires of Kingsport on the horizon, and hints of the archaic, dream-laden sea in the farthest background.

Then came the steeper slope that held the old Carter place he had not seen in over forty years. Afternoon was far gone when he reached the foot, and at the bend half-way up he paused to scan the outspread countryside golden and glorified in the slanting floods of magic poured out by a western sun. All the strangeness and expectancy of his recent dreams seemed present in this hushed and unearthly landscape, and he thought of the unknown solitudes of other planets as his eyes traced out the velvet and deserted lawns shining undulant between their tumbled walls, the clumps of faery forest setting off far lines of purple hills beyond hills, and the spectral wooded valley dipping down in shadow to dank hollows where trickling waters crooned and gurgled among swollen and distorted roots.

Something made him feel that motors did not belong in the realm he was seeking, so he left his car at the edge of the forest, and putting the great key in his coat pocket walked on up the hill. Woods now engulfed him utterly, though he knew the house was on a high knoll that cleared the trees except to the north. He wondered how it would look, for it had been left vacant and untended through his neglect since the death of his strange great-uncle Christopher thirty years before. In his boyhood he had reveled through long visits there, and had found weird marvels in the woods beyond the orchard.

Shadows thickened around him, for the night was near. Once a gap in the trees opened up to the right, so that he saw off across leagues of twilight meadow and spied the old Congregational steeple on Central Hill in Kingsport; pink with the last flush of day, the panes of the little round windows blazing with reflected fire. Then, when he was in deep shadow again, he recalled with a start that the glimpse must have come from childish memory alone, since the old white church had long been torn down to make room for the Congregational Hospital. He had read of it with interest, for the paper had told about some strange burrows or passages found in the rocky hill beneath.

Through his puzzlement a voice piped, and he started again at its familiarity after long years. Old Benijah Corey had been his Uncle Christopher's hired man, and was aged even in those far-off times of his boyhood visits. Now he must be well over a hundred, but that piping voice could come from no one else. He could distinguish no words, yet the tone was haunting and unmistakable. To think that "Old Benijy" should still be alive!

"Mister Randy! Mister Randy! Whar be ye? D'ye want to skeer yer Aunt Marthy plumb to death? Hain't she tuld ye to keep nigh the place in the arternoon an' git back afur dark?

Randy! Ran—dee! . . . He's the beatin'est boy fer runnin' off in the woods I ever see; haff the time a-settin' moonin' raound that snake-den in the upper timber-lot! . . . Hey, yew, Ran—dee!"

RANDOLPH CARTER stopped in the pitch darkness and rubbed his hand across his eyes. Something was queer. He had been somewhere he ought not to be; had strayed very far away to places where he had not belonged, and was now inexcusably late. He had not noticed the time on the Kingsport steeple, though he could easily have made it out with his pocket telescope; but he knew his lateness was something very strange and unprecedented. He was not sure he had his little telescope with him, and put his hand in his blouse pocket to see. No, it was not there, but there was the big silver key he had found in a box somewhere. Uncle Chris had told him something odd once about an old unopened box with a key in it, but Aunt Martha had stopped the story abruptly, saying it was no kind of thing to tell a child whose head was already too full of queer fancies. He tried to recall just where he had found the key, but something seemed very confused. He guessed it was in the attic at home in Boston, and dimly remembered bribing Parks with half his week's allowance to help him open the box and keep quiet about it; but when he remembered this, the face of Parks came up very strangely, as if the wrinkles of long years had fallen upon the brisk little cockney.

"Ran—dee! Ran—dee! Hi! Hi! Randy!"

A swaying lantern came around the black bend, and old Benijah pounced on the silent and bewildered form of the pilgrim.

"Durn ye, boy, so thar ye be! Ain't ye got a tongue in yer head, that ye can't answer a body? I ben callin' this haff hour, an' ye must a heerd me long ago! Don't ye know yer Aunt Marthy's all a-fidget over yer bein' off arter dark? Wait till I tell yer Uncle Chris when he gets hum! Ye'd orta know these here woods ain't no fitten place to be traipsin' this hour! They's things abroad what dun't do nobody no good, as my gran'sir' knowed afur me. Come, Mister Randy, or Hannah wun't keep supper no longer!"

So Randolph Carter was marched up the road where wondering stars glimmered through high autumn boughs. And dogs barked as the yellow light of small-paned windows shone out at the farther turn, and the Pleiades twinkled across the open knoll where a great gambrel roof stood black against the dim west. Aunt Martha was in the doorway, and did not scold too hard when Benijah shoved the truant in. She knew Uncle Chris well enough to expect such things of the Carter blood. Randolph did not show his key, but ate his supper in silence and protested only when bedtime came. He sometimes dreamed better when awake, and he wanted to use that key.

In the morning Randolph was up early, and would have run off to the upper timber-lot if Uncle Chris had not caught him and forced him into his chair by the breakfast table. He looked impatiently around the low-pitched room with the rag carpet and exposed beams and corner-posts, and smiled only when the orchard boughs scratched at the little leaded panes of the rear window. The trees and the hills were close to him, and formed the gates of that timeless realm which was his true country.

Then, when he was free, he felt in his blouse pocket for the key; and being reassured, skipped off across the orchard to the rise beyond, where the wooded hill climbed again to heights above even the treeless knoll. The floor of the forest was mossy and mysterious, and great lichened rocks rose vaguely here and there in the dim light like druid monoliths among the

swollen and twisted trunks of a sacred grove. Once in his ascent Randolph crossed a rushing stream whose falls a little way off sang runic incantations to the lurking fauns and ægipans and dryads.

Then he came to the strange cave in the forest slope, the dreaded "snake-den" which country folk shunned, and away from which Benijah had warned him again and again. It was deep; far deeper than anyone but Randolph suspected, for the boy had found a fissure in the farthermost black corner that led to a loftier grotto beyond—a haunting sepulchral place whose granite walls held a curious illusion of conscious artifice. On this occasion he crawled in as usual, lighting his way with matches filched from the sitting-room match-safe, and edging through the final crevice with an eagerness hard to explain even to himself. He could not tell why he approached the farther wall so confidently, or why he instinctively drew forth the great silver key as he did so. But on he went, and when he danced back to the house that night he offered no excuses for his lateness, nor heeeded in the least the reproofs he gained for ignoring the noontide dinner-horn altogether.

* * * * *

Now it is agreed by all the distant relatives of Randolph Carter that something occurred to heighten his imagination in his tenth year. His cousin, Ernest B. Aspinwall, Esq., of Chicago, is fully ten years his senior and distinctly recalls a change in the boy after the autum of 1883. Randolph had looked on scenes of fantasy that few others can ever have beheld, and stranger still were some of the qualities which he showed in relation to very mundane things. He seemed, in fine, to have picked up an odd gift of prophecy; and reacted unusually to things which, though at the time without meaning, were later found to justify the singular impressions. In subsequent decades as new inventions, new names, and new events appeared one by one in the book of history, people would now and then recall wonderingly how Carter had years before let fall some careless word of undoubted connection with what was then far in the future. He did not himself understand these words, or know why certain things made him feel certain emotions; but fancied that some unremembered dream must be responsible. It was as early as 1897 that he turned pale when some traveler mentioned the French town of Belloy-en-Santerre, and friends remembered it when he was almost mortally wounded there in 1916, while serving with the Foreign Legion in the Great War.

Carter's relatives talk much of these things because he has lately disappeared. His little old servant Parks, who for years bore patiently with his vagaries, last saw him on the morning he drove off alone in his car with a key he had recently found. Parks had helped him get the key from the old box containing it, and had felt strangely affected by the grotesque carvings on the box, and by some other odd quality he could not name. When Carter left, he had said he was going to visit his old ancestral country around Arkham.

Half-way up Elm Mountain, on the way to the ruins of the old Carter place, they found his motor set carefully by the roadside; and in it was a box of fragrant wood with carvings that frightened the countrymen who stumbled on it. The box held only a queer parchment whose characters no linguist or paleographer has been able to decipher or identify. Rain had long effaced any possible footprints, though Boston investigators had something to say about evidences of disturbances among the fallen timbers of the Carter place. It was, they averred, as though someone had groped about the ruins at no distant period. A common white handker-

(Continued on page 144)

SKULLS IN THE STARS

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

"Across the fen sounded a single shriek of terrible laughter."

He told how murderers walk the earth
Beneath the curse of Cain,
With crimson clouds before their eyes
And flames about their brain:
For blood has left upon their souls
Its everlasting stain.

—*Hood*

THERE are two roads to Torkertown. One, the shorter and more direct route, leads across a barren upland moor, and the other, which is much longer, winds its tortuous way in and out among the hummocks and quagmires of the swamps, skirting the low hills to the east. It was a dangerous and tedious trail; so Solomon Kane halted in amazement when a breathless youth from the village he had just left, overtook him and implored him for God's sake to take the swamp road.

"The swamp road!" Kane stared at the boy.

He was a tall, gaunt man, was Solomon Kane, his darkly pallid face and deep brooding eyes made more somber by the drab Puritanical garb he affected.

"Yes, sir, 'tis far safer," the youngster answered his surprized exclamation.

"Then the moor road must be haunted by Satan himself, for your townsmen warned me against traversing the other."

"Because of the quagmires, sir, that you might not see in the dark. You had better return to the village and continue your journey in the morning, sir."

"Taking the swamp road?"

"Yes, sir."

Kane shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"The moon rises almost as soon as twilight dies. By its light I can reach Torkertown in a few hours, across the moor."

"Sir, you had better not. No one ever goes that way. There are no houses at all upon the moor, while in the swamp there is the house of old Ezra who lives there all alone since his maniac cousin, Gideon, wandered off and died in the swamp and was never found—and old Ezra though a miser would not refuse you lodging should you decide to stop until morning. Since you must go, you had better go the swamp road."

Kane eyed the boy piercingly. The lad squirmed and shuffled his feet.

"Since this moor road is so dour to wayfarers," said the Puritan, "why did not the villagers tell me the whole tale, instead of vague mouthings?"

"Men like not to talk of it, sir. We hoped that you would take the swamp road after the men advised you to, but when we watched and saw that you turned not at the forks, they sent me to run after you and beg you to reconsider."

"Name of the Devil!" exclaimed Kane sharply, the unaccustomed oath showing his irritation; "the swamp road and the moor road—what is it that threatens me and why should I go miles out of my way and risk the bogs and mires?"

"Sir," said the boy, dropping his voice and drawing closer, "we be simple villagers who like not to talk of such things lest foul fortune befall us, but the moor road is a way accurst and hath not been traversed by any of the countryside for a year or more. It is death to walk those moors by night, as hath been found by some score of unfortunates. Some foul horror haunts the way and claims men for his victims."

"So? And what is this thing like?"

"No man knows. None has ever seen it and lived, but late-farers have heard terrible laughter far out on the fen and men have heard the horrid shrieks of its victims. Sir, in God's name return to the village, there pass the night, and tomorrow take the swamp trail to Torkertown."

Far back in Kane's gloomy eyes a scintillant light had begun to glimmer, like a witch's torch glinting under fathoms of cold gray ice. His blood quickened. Adventure! The lure of life-risk and battle! The thrill of breathtaking, touch-and-go drama! Not that Kane recognized his sensations as such. He sincerely considered that he voiced his real feelings when he said:

"These things be deeds of some power of evil. The lords of darkness have laid a curse upon the country. A strong man is needed to combat Satan and his might. Therefore I go, who have defied him many a time."

"Sir," the boy began, then closed his mouth as he saw the futility of argument. He only added, "The corpses of the victims are bruised and torn, sir."

He stood there at the crossroads, sighing regretfully as he watched the tall, rangy figure swinging up the road that led toward the moors.

THE sun was setting as Kane came over the brow of the low hill which debouched into the upland fen. Huge and blood-red it sank down behind the sullen horizon of the moors, seeming to touch the rank grass with fire; so for a moment the watcher seemed to be gazing out across a sea of blood. Then the dark shadows came gliding from the east, the western blaze faded, and Solomon Kane struck out boldly in the gathering darkness.

The road was dim from disuse but was clearly defined. Kane went swiftly but warily, sword and pistols at hand. Stars blinked out and night winds whispered among the grass like weeping specters. The moon began to rise, lean and haggard, like a skull among the stars.

Then suddenly Kane stopped short. From somewhere in front of him sounded a strange and eery echo—or

something like an echo. Again, this time louder. Kane started forward again. Were his senses deceiving him? No!

Far out, there pealed a whisper of frightful laughter. And again, closer this time. No human being ever laughed like that—there was no mirth in it, only hatred and horror and soul-destroying terror. Kane halted. He was not afraid, but for the second he was almost unnerved. Then, stabbing through that awesome laughter, came the sound of a scream that was undoubtedly human. Kane started forward, increasing his gait. He cursed the illusive lights and flickering shadows which veiled the moor in the rising moon and made accurate sight impossible. The laughter continued, growing louder, as did the screams. Then sounded faintly the drum of frantic human feet. Kane broke into a run.

Some human was being hunted to his death out there on the fen, and by what manner of horror God alone knew. The sound of the flying feet halted abruptly and the screaming rose unbearably, mingled with other sounds unnamable and hideous. Evidently the man had been overtaken, and Kane, his flesh crawling, visualized some ghastly fiend of the darkness crouching on the back of its victim—crouching and tearing.

Then the noise of a terrible and short struggle came clearly through the abysmal silence of the fen and the footfalls began again, but stumbling and uneven. The screaming continued, but with a gasping gurgle. The sweat stood cold on Kane's forehead and body. This was heaping horror on horror in an intolerable manner.

God, for a moment's clear light! The frightful drama was being enacted within a very short distance of him, to judge by the ease with which the sounds reached him. But this hellish half-light veiled all in shifting shadows, so that the moors appeared a haze of blurred illusions, and stunted trees and bushes seemed like giants.

Kane shouted, striving to increase the speed of his advance. The shrieks of the unknown broke into a hideous shrill squealing; again there was the sound of a struggle, and then from the shadows of the tall grass a thing came reeling—a thing that had once been a man—a gore-covered, frightful thing that fell at Kane's feet and writhed and groveled and raised its terrible face to the rising moon, and gibbered and yammered, and fell down again and died in its own blood.

The moon was up now and the light was better. Kane bent above the body, which lay stark in its unnamable mutilation, and he shuddered—a rare thing for him, who had seen the deeds of the Spanish Inquisition and the witch-finders.

Some wayfarer, he supposed. Then like a hand of ice on his spine he was aware that he was not alone. He looked up, his cold eyes piercing the shadows whence the dead man had staggered. He saw nothing, but he knew—he felt—that other eyes gave back his stare, terrible eyes not of this earth. He straightened and drew a pistol, waiting. The moonlight spread like a lake of pale blood over the moor, and trees and grasses took on their proper sizes.

The shadows melted, and Kane *saw!* At first he thought it only a shadow of mist, a wisp of moor fog that swayed in the tall grass before him. He gazed. More illusion, he thought. Then the thing began to take on shape, vague and indistinct. Two hideous eyes flamed at him—eyes which held all the stark horror which has been the heritage of man since the fearful dawn ages—eyes frightful and insane, with an insanity transcending earthly insanity. The form of the thing was misty and vague, a brain-shattering travesty on the human form, like, yet horridly unlike. The grass and bushes beyond showed clearly through it.

Kane felt the blood pound in his temples, yet he was as cold as ice. How such an unstable being as that which wavered before him could harm a man in a physical way was more than he could understand, yet the red horror at his feet gave mute testimony that the fiend could act with terrible material effect.

Of one thing Kane was sure: there would be no hunting of him across the dreary moors, no screaming and fleeing to be dragged down again and again. If he must die he would die in his tracks, his wounds in front.

Now a vague and grisly mouth gaped wide and the demoniac laughter again shrieked out, soul-shaking in its nearness. And in the midst of that threat of doom, Kane deliberately leveled his long pistol and fired. A maniacal yell of rage and mockery answered the report, and the thing came at him like a flying sheet of smoke, long shadowy arms stretched to drag him down.

Kane, moving with the dynamic speed of a famished wolf, fired the second pistol with as little effect, snatched his long rapier from its sheath and thrust into the center of the misty attacker. The blade sang as it passed clear through, encountering no solid resistance, and Kane felt icy fingers grip his limbs, bestial talons tear his garments and the skin beneath.

He dropped the useless sword and sought to grapple with his foe. It was like fighting a floating mist, a flying shadow armed with daggerlike claws. His savage blows met empty air, his leanly mighty arms, in whose grasp strong men had died, swept nothingness and clutched emptiness. Naught was solid or real save the flaying, apelike fingers with their crooked talons, and the crazy eyes which burned into the shuddering depths of his soul.

Kane realized that he was in a desperate plight indeed. Already his garments hung in tatters and he bled from a score of deep wounds. But he never flinched, and the thought of flight never entered his mind. He had never fled from a single foe, and had the thought occurred to him he would have flushed with shame.

He saw no help for it now, but that his form should lie there beside the fragments of the other victim, but the thought held no terrors for him. His only wish was to give as good an account of himself as possible before the end came, and if he could, to inflict some damage on his unearthly foe.

There above the dead man's torn body, man fought with demon under the pale light of the rising moon, with all the advantages with the demon, save one. And that one was enough to overcome all the others. For if abstract hate may bring into material substance a ghostly thing, may not courage, equally abstract, form a concrete weapon to combat that ghost?

Kane fought with his arms and his feet and his hands, and he was aware at last that the ghost began to give back before him, that the fearful laughter changed to screams of baffled fury. For man's only weapon is courage that flinches not from the gates of Hell itself, and against such not even the legions of Hell can stand.

Of this Kane knew nothing; he only knew that the talons which tore and rended him seemed to grow weaker and wavering, that a wild light grew and grew in the horrible eyes. And reeling and gasping, he rushed in, grappled the thing at last and threw it, and as they tumbled about on the moor and it writhed and lapped his limbs like a serpent of smoke, his flesh crawled and his hair stood on end, for he began to understand its gibbering.

He did not hear and comprehend as a man hears and comprehends the speech of a man, but the frightful secrets it imparted in whisperings and yammerings and screaming silences sank fingers of ice and flame into his soul, and he *knew*.

2

THE hut of old Ezra the miser stood by the road in the midst of the swamp, half screened by the sullen trees which grew about it. The walls were rotting, the roof crumbling, and great, pallid and green fungus-monsters clung to it and writhed about the doors and windows, as if seeking to peer within. The trees leaned above it and their gray branches intertwined so that it crouched in the semi-darkness like a monstrous dwarf over whose shoulder ogres leer.

The road which wound down into the swamp, among rotting stumps and rank hummocks and scummy, snake-haunted pools and bogs, crawled past the hut. Many people passed that way these days, but few saw old Ezra, save a glimpse of a yellow face, peering through the fungus-screened windows, itself like an ugly fungus.

Old Ezra the miser partook much of the quality of the swamp, for he was gnarled and bent and sullen; his fingers were like clutching parasitic plants and his locks hung like drab moss above eyes trained to the murk of the swamplands. His eyes were like a dead man's, yet hinted of depths abysmal and loathsome as the dead lakes of the swamplands.

These eyes gleamed now at the man who stood in front of his hut. This man was tall and gaunt and dark, his face was haggard and claw-marked, and he was bandaged of arm and leg. Somewhat behind this man stood a number of villagers.

"You are Ezra of the swamp road?"

"Aye, and what want ye of me?"

"Where is your cousin Gideon, the maniac youth who abode with you?"

"Gideon?"

"Aye."

"He wandered away into the swamp and never came back. No doubt he lost his way and was set upon by wolves or died in a quagmire or was struck by an adder."

"How long ago?"

"Over a year."

"Aye. Hark ye, Ezra the miser. Soon after your cousin's disappearance, a countryman, coming home across the moors, was set upon by some unknown fiend and torn to pieces, and thereafter it became death to cross those moors. First men of the countryside, then strangers who wandered over the fen, fell to the clutches of the thing. Many men have died, since the first one.

"Last night I crossed the moors, and heard the flight and pursuing of another victim, a stranger who knew not the evil of the moors. Ezra the miser, it was a fearful thing, for the wretch twice broke from the fiend, terribly wounded, and each time the demon caught and dragged him down again. And at last he fell dead at my very feet, done to death in a manner that would freeze the statue of a saint."

The villagers moved restlessly and murmured fearfully to each other, and old Ezra's eyes shifted furtively. Yet the somber expression of Solomon Kane never altered, and his condor-like stare seemed to transfix the miser.

"Aye, aye!" muttered old Ezra hurriedly; "a bad thing, a bad thing! Yet why do you tell this thing to me?"

"Aye, a sad thing. Harken further, Ezra. The fiend came out of the shadows and I fought with it, over the body of its victim. Aye, how I overcame it, I know not, for the battle was hard and long, but the powers of good and light were on my side, which are mightier than the powers of Hell.

"At the last I was stronger, and it broke from me and fled, and I followed to no avail. Yet before it fled it whispered to me a monstrous truth."

Old Ezra started, stared wildly, seemed to shrink into himself.

"Nay, why tell me this?" he muttered.

"I returned to the village and told my tale," said Kane, "for I knew that now I had the power to rid the moors of its curse forever. Ezra, come with us!"

"Where?" gasped the miser.

"*To the rotting oak on the moors.*"

Ezra reeled as though struck; he screamed incoherently and turned to flee.

On the instant, at Kane's sharp order, two brawny villagers sprang forward and seized the miser. They twisted the dagger from his withered hand, and pinioned his arms, shuddering as their fingers encountered his clammy flesh.

Kane motioned them to follow, and turning strode up the trail, followed by the villagers, who found their strength taxed to the utmost in their task of bearing their prisoner along. Through the swamp they went and out, taking a little-used trail which led up over the low hills and out on the moors.

THE sun was sliding down the horizon and old Ezra stared at it with bulging eyes—stared as if he could not gaze enough. Far out on the moors reared up the great oak tree, like a gibbet, now only a decaying shell. There Solomon Kane halted.

Old Ezra writhed in his captor's grasp and made inarticulate noises.

"Over a year ago," said Solomon Kane, "you, fearing that your insane cousin Gideon would tell men of your cruelties to him, brought him away from the swamp by the very trail by which we came, and murdered him here in the night."

Ezra cringed and snarled.

"You can not prove this lie!"

Kane spoke a few words to an agile villager. The youth clambered up the rotting bole of the tree and from a crevice, high up, dragged something that fell with a clatter at the feet of the miser. Ezra went limp with a terrible shriek.

The object was a man's skeleton, the skull cleft.

"You—how knew you this? You are Satan!" gibbered old Ezra.

Kane folded his arms.

"The thing I fought last night told me this thing as we reeled in battle, and I followed it to this tree. *For the fiend is Gideon's ghost.*"

Ezra shrieked again and fought savagely.

"You knew," said Kane somberly, "you knew what thing did these deeds. You feared the ghost of the maniac, and that is why you chose to leave his body on the fen instead of concealing it in the swamp. For you knew the ghost would haunt the place of his death. He was insane in life, and in death he did not know where to find his slayer; else he had come to you in your hut. He hates no man but you, but his mazed spirit can not tell one man from another, and he slays all, lest he let his killer escape. Yet he will know you and rest in peace forever after. Hate hath made of his ghost a solid thing that can rend and slay, and though he feared you terribly in life, in death he fears you not."

Kane halted. He glanced at the sun.

"All this I had from Gideon's ghost, in his yammerings and his whisperings and his shrieking silences. Naught but your death will lay that ghost."

Ezra listened in breathless silence and Kane pronounced the words of his doom.

"A hard thing it is," said Kane somberly, "to sentence a man to death in cold blood and in such a manner as I have in mind, but you must die that others may live—and God knoweth you deserve death.

"You shall not die by noose, bullet or sword, but at the talons of him you slew—for naught else will satiate him."

At these words Ezra's brain shat-

tered, his knees gave way and he fell groveling and screaming for death, begging them to burn him at the stake, to flay him alive. Kane's face was set like death, and the villagers, the fear rousing their cruelty, bound the screeching wretch to the oak tree, and one of them bade him make his peace with God. But Ezra made no answer, shrieking in a high shrill voice with unbearable monotony. Then the villager would have struck the miser across the face, but Kane stayed him.

"Let him make his peace with Satan, whom he is more like to meet," said the Puritan grimly. "The sun is about to set. Loose his cords so that he may work loose by dark, since it is better to meet death free and unshackled than bound like a sacrifice."

As they turned to leave him, old Ezra yammered and gibbered unhuman sounds and then fell silent, staring at the sun with terrible intensity.

They walked away across the fen, and Kane flung a last look at the grotesque form bound to the tree, seeming in the uncertain light like a great fungus growing to the bole. And suddenly the miser screamed hideously:

"Death! Death! There are skulls in the stars!"

"Life was good to him, though he was gnarled and churlish and evil," Kane sighed. "Mayhap God has a place for such souls where fire and sacrifice may cleanse them of their dross as fire cleans the forest of fungous things. Yet my heart is heavy within me."

"Nay, sir," one of the villagers spoke, "you have done but the will of God, and good alone shall come of this night's deed."

"Nay," answered Kane heavily, "I know not—I know not."

THE sun had gone down and night spread with amazing swiftness, as if great shadows came rushing down from unknown voids to cloak the world with hurrying darkness. Through the thick night came a weird echo, and the men halted and looked back the way they had come.

Nothing could be seen. The moor was an ocean of shadows and the tall grass about them bent in long waves before the faint wind, breaking the deathly stillness with breathless murmurings.

Then far away the red disk of the moon rose over the fen, and for an instant a grim silhouette was etched blackly against it. A shape came flying across the face of the moon—a bent, grotesque thing whose feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth; and close behind came a thing like a flying shadow—a nameless, shapeless horror.

A moment the racing twain stood out boldly against the moon; then they merged into one unnamable, formless mass, and vanished in the shadows.

Far across the fen sounded a single shriek of terrible laughter.

In Stupefied Horror, They Saw Through the Microscope

The Jelly-Fish

By DAVID H. KELLER

"ALL space is relative. There is no such thing as size. The telescope and the microscope have produced a deadly leveling of great and small, far and near. The only little thing is sin, the only great thing is fear."

For the hundredth time Professor Quierling repeated his statement, and for the hundredth time we listened to him in silence, afraid to enter into a controversy with him. It was not the fact that he knew more than we did that kept us quiet, but it was the haunting fear that filled us when we listened to him or watched him at his work.

Working at an unsolved problem, he seemed a soul detached, a spirit separated from its earthly home, a being, living only in the realm of thought. Motionless, his body sat catatonic; his eyes stared, unwinking, till his mind, satisfied, condescended to return to its bone-bound cell. Then, in magnificent condescension, he would talk in long, limpid language of the things that he had considered and the conclusions that he had deduced. We, chosen scientists, university graduates, hailed him as our master and hated him for admitting the mastery.

We hoped that some evil would befall him, and yet we realized that the success of the expedition depended upon his continued leadership. It was necessary for our future fame: we were struggling young men with all of life ahead of us, and if we failed in our first effort, there would be no other opportunities granted us.

In a specially constructed yacht, a floating laboratory, we were south of Borneo, making a detailed study of the microscopic sea life. In deep-sea nets we gathered the tiny organisms, and then with microscope, photography, and the cinema we observed them for the future instruction of the human race. There were hundreds of species, thousands of varieties, each to be identified, classified, described, studied, and photographed. We gathered in the morning, studied till midnight and restlessly slept till morning. The only thing in which we agreed was ambition. Our solitary united emotion was a dreaded hatred of the professor.

He knew how we felt and enjoyed taunting us.

"I am your leader because I willed it," he would whisper to us. "The will to attain with me is synonymous with the accomplishment of my desire. I believe in myself, and through this belief I succeed. There is nothing that a strong man can not do if he wills to do it and believes in his strength. Our ideas of space, size and time are but the fanciful dreams of children. I am fifty-nine inches tall, and, with my clothes, weigh one hundred and ten pounds. If I desired, I could make myself a colossus and swallow the earth as a child swallows a pill. If I willed it, I could fly through space like a comet or

hang suspended in the ether like a morning star. My will is greater than any physical force, because I believe in it: I have confidence in my own ability to do whatever I wish. So far, I have conducted myself like an average man because of my desire and not on account of my limitations. Man has a soul, and that ethereal force is greater than any law of nature that he ever thought of, or of any that God ever created. He is purely and totally supreme—if he so desires."

It was after such a challenge to us, and the universe, that our chemist, Bullard, gathered courage to challenge his power. He stated his opinion sharply and to the point:

"I do not believe you."

"What is that to me?" answered the professor.

"Simply this. You make a statement of certain powers that you have. I say that it is not true. Of what good is it to boast if you know that we think you a liar? Can you do these things? If you can, do them for us, and I for one will call you greater than God. Fail to do them, and I brand you as a boasting liar."

The professor looked at the chemist, and we, breathlessly, waited for the blow to fall. But he only laughed.

"You want a sign? A proof? I have thought of just such a thing, and I would have proposed it myself had one of you not asked for it. The thing must be visible to you all, something that I can demonstrate, a thing unheard of, a thing thought by all men to be impossible, and yet I will do it. Listen to me.

"You have all seen the jelly-fish, called the Bishop's Miter. When it is magnified three hundred times under the microscope, it looks like a small balloon with a large opening at one end. It propels its way through the water by the flagellate movement of its cilia. The walls are translucent and transparent. At the top there are two specialized groups of nerve cells which we believe may serve as eyes. The opening at the bottom serves as a mouth. Smaller cells enter there and are absorbed. I describe it to refresh your memory, though all of you have seen it. I will secure one in a hanging drop under the microscope, and then we will attach the camera and cinema to it. We will project the picture on our screen. You will see the Miter move and live; you will observe the cilia move.

"While we have the actual specimen under observation, I will look at it through the microscope. Then I will demonstrate to you that I am not the idle boaster that you think I am. I will perform an experiment that will win for me the name of the greatest scientist that has ever lived."

When he had told us the nature of it we were too much astonished to reply. It seemed evident that the man had become insane. He smiled at us as though we were children.

After waiting for an answer and seeing that we had none to give, he began to prepare the apparatus for the experiment. Finally all was to his satisfaction. After examining several drops of water from our specimen jar, he was able to imprison a Bishop's Miter in the hanging drop under the microscope. He turned on the electricity, and we saw the jelly-fish move upon the screen.

The professor carefully adjusted the apparatus till the organism appeared with more than usual distinctness. We saw the little animal that he had so carefully described to us. We even saw the little projections, which we believed were rudimentary visual organs.

Then Professor Quierling told the cinema operator what he wanted done. He was to take a picture, starting from the time the professor disappeared down the brass tube of the microscope and continuing till he reappeared. No matter what hap-

pened, he was to go on taking pictures.

"It is all well enough," said our master, "for you children to see what is happening and to talk about it later, but who would believe you? We know that the camera can not lie. That is why it is important to take a consecutive picture of what occurs. Otherwise, you might think that I have been able to hypnotize you. Now, I will look down this tube. I see at the bottom in the hanging drop a transparent balloon. It is a pretty sight. Watch me carefully as I will myself to shrink. I will go on talking as long as I can, and you must listen carefully, because the smaller I am the less audible will be my voice.

"Now I am twelve inches high. I am standing near the microscope. I become still smaller and now I am only one inch tall and am standing on the eyepiece. No doubt, you can barely hear me. Now I am smaller yet and am ready to will myself through the glass of the eyepiece."

THE room was silent. We looked, shivering, at the microscope, and the professor was gone. The chemist staggered over to the instrument, looked into it, and silently staggered back to his seat.

On the screen in front of us the inhabitants of the drop of water lived and moved and had their being. Largest of all was the transparent jelly-fish, which was moving restlessly as though seeking a way of escape. The only sound in the room was the whir of the cinema and the harsh breathing of the chemist.

Then, on the screen, came a new figure, and we were able to identify the professor, swimming among the infusoria. Gaining his balance, he at last stood upright and waved his hand at us. It was easy to see his smile, that condescending smile that had so often driven us frantic. There was no doubt from the expression on his face that he was highly pleased with his performance. None of us dared look at his fellow; not one of the audience thought for a second of taking his eyes off the silver screen. We were stunned, stupefied and filled with a wild terror, all the more horrible because of its silence.

The professor started to swim again and now approached the jelly-fish. He tapped the crystal walls; then, as though seized with a sudden impulse, he went to the bottom, jumped up through the mouth and entered the translucent ball of protoplasm. He peered at us through the transparent walls. His arms made a series of peculiar movements and once again he smiled at us.

"My God!" exclaimed the artist. "He is wigwagging to us in the army code. He said, 'I have done it, and now I will return to your world.'"

And, as though beginning to keep his promise, he started for the mouth of the jelly-fish; and then—and then——

The mouth closed.

The professor circled the glasslike ball, seeking a way of exit. Once he waved at us in a peculiar manner, and then suddenly he sought the wall and, with arms and legs, tried to break through. On his face was now the look of ghastly despair. The things on top of the jelly-fish began to glow—no doubt now that they were eyes, and bright ones.

Before us, the professor slowly disappeared into a globule of milky protoplasm. The jelly-fish not only had made him a prisoner, but had actually dissolved and digested him. With a shriek, the artist went over to the wall and turned on the electric lights. Trembling, the chemist looked down the tube of the microscope and told us that there was nothing in the hanging drop save the jelly-fish.

THE DEVIL'S FINGER

BY · A · A · IRVINE ·

"The soul of Bauna the Dwarf joined the souls of the warrior-heroes in Surya-loka—and the gates crashed open."

SATTYAMURTI the Saint, absorbed in contemplation of the Para-Brahma, the Infinite One, sat solitary on the edge of a bluff. With unseeing eyes he gazed across the sacred river gleaming under the blaze from a cloudless sky.

Upon his head, close-tonsured, save for a single lock, the sun's rays beat pitilessly; yet he recked not of it. Heat and cold, hunger and thirst, had long since ceased to rank as penances voluntarily undergone. *Yoga*—profound meditation—was achieving what repression of the passions had begun. Whilst all around him his fellow-men toiled in pursuit of power or wealth or love, there was naught that he craved except *Nirvana*, final deliverance, extinction.

His countenance was that of the true *sannyasi*, penitent, serene, devoid of guile, the skin drawn parchment-tight on the high cheek-bones. His eyes, deep-sunken, were those of a visionary. Naked to the middle, the lower portion of his tall figure, shrunken to extreme emaciation, was covered by a single garment of reddish-saffron cloth. From left shoulder to right hip depended the *janeo*—the triple Brahmanical cord. His staff and sandals lay on the ground beside him.

In front of him, beyond where a drowsy crocodile sunned itself on a mud-bank, a distant range of low, arid hills showed through the quivering heat-haze. Behind him, in the gloomy, thick-set shelter of the mango-groves, flocks of gaudy parrots chattered on the branches, and troops of monkeys squabbled and played. Yet he heeded them not: like an image carved from stone he sat, silent and motionless, with Life and Death on either hand.

Downstream, to his right, blue-gray wreaths of smoke curled lazily upward from the funeral pyres of the burning-*ghats*. Upstream, clustered like ants around the myriad conical-roofed temples, jostling one another on the long flights of steps leading to the margin of the river, dense crowds of men, women and children shouted and surged in the gay turmoil of a bathing-festival. The river itself was black with them, standing waist-deep for the barbers to rid them of their beards and hair and eyebrows. It was the season when the Sun had entered the sign of the Ram, and it behooved all pious Hindoos to bathe in the waters of purification.

For many hours had the saint been seated thus, remote from the world. But though his expression was serene, there were questions that troubled him always.

Were Good and Evil mere figments of the imagination? Were the Universe and all its phenomena nothing better than *Maya*, Illusion? Like all Hindoos, he had learnt in childhood that, after nearly four million years, this world was now in *Kali-yuga*, the Iron Age, the Age of Misery. Virtue had ceased to rule; everyone and all things were under the domination of "The Man of Sin," created by Vishnu to torment humanity. But what if there were no reality of existence, save that of the Para-Brahma alone? Sattyamurti nodded his head slowly. Some day the truth of the matter would be revealed to him.

The shadows began to lengthen, and he roused himself from his trance. He picked up his staff and sandals, and bent his footsteps along the road, ankle-deep in powdery dust toward the city. From the great red-sandstone walls the turrets jutted out like monstrous heads of war-elephants advancing in line of battle. He drew nearer, and passed under the arched gateway.

The narrow bazar-lanes were packed with a brightly dressed, ever-moving throng. There were groups slaking their thirst at the wooden stalls of the *sharbat*-sellers, chaffering with the vendors of cheap glass bangles. Pedlers of charms and amulets wrangled with the fortune-tellers over clients. Stout Brahman priests, ever on the watch for gain, bustled about solicitous of offerings for the temples, guiding sight-seers down to the tanks to feed the sacred fish. Acrobats and snake-charmers were plying their trade. Ever and anon a drove of tiny donkeys, or a string of softly padding camels, part of the caravan of some grim-faced, bushy-bearded trader from the North, forced a way through the gaping holiday-crowd with little ceremony.

Here and there, in the shade of the booths, were men upon whom the eyes of the saint rested coldly—loathly *fakirs*, naked except for a loin-cloth, red-eyed from drafts of intoxicating *bhang*, their bodies gray with ashes, and ashes in their unkempt, matted hair. He knew them for what they were—charlatans, holy merely by favor of Oriental custom. Such an one had traveled for many a hundred miles toilsomely measuring his length along the highway, and now lay stretched upon a bed of spikes in a venial parade of holiness. Another, self-mutilated for a life of idleness, held aloft immovable his withered, stiffened arms. A third, slung from a bamboo pole head-downward, like a great bat, poured forth a blessing or a curse, according as passers-by en-

riched or ignored the begging-bowl rattled ceaselessly by his disciple.

Sattyamurti turned his glance from them to the bathers returning from the river carrying their bowls filled with sacred water. Purged of their sins, they were happy. And yet, he reflected sorrowfully, it needed but a chance word from one of them to lead to a blow, a blow to lead to a quarrel, a quarrel to a riot—thus, from a trivial happening might result death and disaster!

He passed on, and at the corner close to the shop of Abdulla, the sweetmeat-seller, paused for a while beneath the spreading branches of a peepul-tree. On the opposite side of the lane towered the lofty enclosure-wall of the palace gardens. From the open shop-front came the buzz of flies hovering over the pots of honey and sugar-coated cakes. Abdulla, his palm-leaf fan fallen from his hand, snored on his strip of matting.

And, of a sudden, it seemed to Sattyamurti as if the radiance had departed from the day. It was as though a dusky pall of cloud had been drawn across the sun, shrouding the streets in shadow. Down the center of the lane came twirling toward him a column of dust, growing as it came; and before it drove a wind scorching as a blast from a hell-furnace in *Naraka*. And Sattyamurti knew that it heralded the approach of "The Man of Sin."

He felt no fear. Thrice before had he seen him; had spoken to him, plying him with questions. And thrice had "The Man of Sin" listened, smiling his malignant smile, but returning no answer.

The dust-cloud thinned, and there appeared, leaning against the mud-wall of the shop, one elbow resting on the roof of it, the gigantic figure of him whom Hindoos call "The Executioner of Mankind." Except for his belly, which was scarlet, his body was black as jet. His hair and beard were long and white. From high above the lintel of the doorway his visage, distorted by rage, glared down upon the saint with wild, bright eyes.

Sattyamurti questioned him boldly.

"Oh, Man of Sin," he demanded, "why dost thou range this beautiful world seeking to bring misfortune upon men?"

For a space there was a silence; then came the answer, with a crooked smile: "I do no such thing!"

"Verily, thou art rightly called the Father of Lies!" rejoined Sattyamurti, impatiently. "The justice of my saying is clear to me. For wheresoever thou goest there follow calamities—hatred and murder, rapine and war. But for thee, this earth might well be Paradise. Again I say, why dost thou do this wickedness?"

"The Man of Sin" answered him once more: "I do not!"

Thereat he broke into mocking laughter at the saint, and mocking stooped and dipped one huge black finger in a jar round which the flies were buzzing. With his finger he daubed a glistening smear of honey along the lintel of the doorway. And he was gone.

For a few moments longer Sattyamurti lingered, wrapped in thought. And whilst he pondered, a fly hovered for an instant over that shining smear of honey, then settled on it. Sattyamurti stood watching, and like a streak of emerald flashing through the sunlight a lizard darted downward from the eaves, and gulped the fly.

The saint shook his head sorrowfully.

"The Devil's Finger!" he muttered. "Behold, already three links in the chain of destruction! The honey, the fly and the lizard. What shall the last link be?"

IN HER pavilion set high upon the walls, Aparajita the Princess reclined listlessly against her pile of silken cushions. Through the latticed

window in front of her drifted the hum of the busy streets below. From the palace pleasure-grounds a soft breeze wafted the heavy perfume of roses and orange-blossoms into that cool retreat. In the peaceful half-light of the pillared hall, whose alabaster columns reflected in the dark-green marble floor seemed to her whimsical fancy a flock of giant swans dipping their necks in water, she could lie and watch through the open portico gay butterflies flitting in radiant sunshine from flower to flower of the scented gardens, poised for a second on the brink of a tinkling fountain.

In attendance on her were her handmaidens, Alipriya and Hasamurti, along with Bauna the Dwarf, one of the few men whom she was permitted to see.

Of the two girls Hasamurti was her favorite. She was smaller than her mistress, lovely, feather-brained, fond of intrigue—well named Laughter Incarnate. Alipriya was a graver beauty, conceited, sullen sometimes, but skilled in the singing of love-songs to the lute-shaped *vina*. As for Bauna the Dwarf, grizzle-bearded, with the strength and valor of a lion in his squat body, yet with ever a humorous twinkle in his keen dark eyes, the princess knew that he would give his life for her. "Was she not Aparajita, the Peerless One?" he would say to himself, as he sat by the window teaching some new tricks to Chor Khan, the monkey.

And, in truth, she was worthy of a man's adoration. Her face was a pure oval, the chin a little pointed, like a peepul-leaf. The crest-jewel of her charms was her mouth, drooped slightly at the corners, the soul of vermilion in her lips. Her eyes were lazy mirrors, long-lashed under the twin arches of her brow. A coil of dusky, jasmine-scented hair twined over one rounded hip curved like a breaking wave. Upon the silken bodice a shell-pink lotus nestled in the hollow between her breasts. From the waist downward she was robed in silver tissue, which scarce concealed the graceful symmetry of dainty limbs. There were rings and jewels everywhere: pendent from delicate nostrils, on slender throat and arms, on fingers and little feet rosy with henna.

But though she was made for love, and dreamed of it, love would never be hers. She knew that clearly. Parents she had none; and Raja Nal Singh, her uncle, Chief of Kamber, bent on alliance with the neighboring state of Aundi, had framed her destiny. Though a princess, she was but a pawn in a game between two kings. The gem-studded coconut, symbol of a marriage offer, had been accepted. Before the year had died she would be consort of one old enough to be her father, drug-sodden, sated with life, wearied of other women! With a sigh she turned her head, and gazed down through the lattice at the freedom of the open street.

Standing under a peepul-tree, close to Abdulla's shop, she saw a tall figure clothed in the garb of an ascetic. His face was upturned, and his lips were moving, as though in converse with himself.

"Who is yonder *sannyasi*?" she inquired of Bauna the Dwarf.

Bauna rose, and with the two girls looked through the window.

"He is Sattyamurti the Saint," he answered, promptly. "A holy man, indeed—not like the others. Even the raja listens when he speaks."

"He has the face of one who would bring peace," the princess murmured. "But see!—he talks with someone, though there is none present!"

"All *sannyasis* are mad!" declared Hasamurti, giggling.

"Perhaps he is making a *jap*!" Alipriya suggested, with a shiver, fingering the charm at her neck. "It is well known that such men can

make powerful spells against their enemies."

"Perhaps he communes with the Gods," the princess hazarded, gravely. "I would that I might listen awhile to such an one as he!"

" 'Twould be but time wasted," Hasamurti interjected, pertly. "Doubtless he looks on all women as a peacock looks on snakes!"

"Nevertheless, some day I would have speech with him," the princess said. "For I think there be many things that he could tell me."

Alipriya simpered: "All that I desire to hear from a man is that I am beautiful!"

Bauna, who trusted her but little, eyed her askance.

"That I can believe!" he snapped. "The saint would have naught in common with thee! He cares nothing for the trifles of this world. But it is said that as a swan can separate milk from water, so can Sattyamurti distinguish truth from falsehood. Wherefore, be careful!"

Alipriya retorted angrily: "Thou hintest, then, that I——?"

"Thou mayest divine my meaning! There came lately to mine ears a tale——"

"Thine ears, forsooth!—which project from thy pumpkin head like the two arms of a pot, less for hearing than for handling——!"

Bauna only grinned. The insult fell on him like a leaf on the back of an elephant.

Chor Khan, the monkey, created a diversion. His small, gray head thrust through the lattice-work, he was staring at the lintel on the confectioner's doorway. Then he scrambled through and swung down, clinging to the tufts of coarse grass in the wall-crevices.

Hasamurti clapped her hands gleefully.

"He goes to raid old fat Abdulla's store!" she cried. "Aho!—rightly is he named Chor Khan, Prince of Thieves!"

"Nay, it is the lizard that he chases," Bauna said. "Now watch!"

Chor Khan crept stealthily across the street, then sprang suddenly upward. A second later the dead body of the lizard fell into the roadway.

There was a smear of honey on the lintel. Chor Khan found it to his liking, and descended to where the jars on the wooden trestles promised ampler provision.

And whilst he gorged himself at leisure, darting ever and anon a wary glance at the snoring form of his unwitting host, those in the pavilion heard the distant murmur of a mob swarming along the narrow wards of the bazars. The sound drew nearer, and Bauna enlightened the women.

" 'Tis but a crowd of sight-seers," he explained, "gaping at Shaitan, the raja's fighting blood-horse. His grooms lead him back to the stables."

They could see Shaitan presently, a huge bay ramping beast, nostrils distended, ears cocked and eyeballs aglare, tearing at the cruel thorn-bit in his jaws. To each cheek-piece of the bit had been welded rings of steel, through which ran ropes gripped by strong men. On his steaming, foam-flecked coat were deep-cut talon-scars; for, once on a feast-day, as all the city-folk remembered, Shaitan had fought before the raja in the walled arena with Ali Sher, the tiger, and had trampled him to death. More than one man had died beneath those iron-shod hooves.

The noise awoke Abdulla. He sat up, saw the monkey robbing him, and with a bellow of wrath went blundering forward. A great brass tray of sweetmeats clattered into the street, and Chor Khan, scuttling to safety, sprang from the trestles under the forefeet of the furious horse. Shaitan, with a snort of mingled rage and terror, reared straight up, wrenching the ropes from the grasp of those who held them.

There followed pandemonium. Sensing his freedom, the mighty

brute wheeled and plunged murderously at the struggling throng behind him. A cry went up: "The Man-Slayer! The Man-Slayer is loose!" One unlucky wretch, seized by the shoulder in a vicious grip, was whirled from his feet and hurled with a sickening thud against a pillar. The bazar emptied like magic, doors slamming as those fortunate enough to be near them bolted like rabbits into their holes.

But the bazar was not quite empty. In the center of it, forgotten in the general stampede, there stood bawling for his mother a tiny brown-skinned urchin. From behind the latticed window the princess, breathless with horror, saw the maddened beast glimpse his fresh quarry and bear down upon it open-mouthed. An instant later the small screaming bundle was snatched aloft, held by a strip of clothing.

And then, before worse could happen, there came rushing from a near-by alleyway a man armed with a brass-shod cudgel. Dauntlessly he tore the child from the reeking jaws, leaped sideways, dropped it behind him; then, turning swiftly, swung the cudgel up two-handed and brought it crashing down between the great brute's eyes. Stunned by the blow, Shaitan staggered bewildered, and with a yell of triumph his panic-stricken grooms dashed from their shelter and flung themselves upon the trailing guide-ropes. But as the thorn-bit racked his mouth afresh, his savage heels lashed out. Struck on the side, his vanquisher rolled over and lay still.

Aparajita the Princess, heedless of her sobbing maidens, stood by the window wide-eyed. She could see him lying there, a young, strong man, his calm, pale face turned skyward. And then—she saw him again, brave as the War God, fair as the God of Love, who carries a bow of flowers with a row of bees for his bowstring. An arrow had pierced her heart!

Bauna the Dwarf spoke first.

"By the favor of Rama I have this day seen a Man!" he burst out, exultantly. "And look!—he moves! Inquiry shall be made as to his name, so that he may receive the reward which is fitting."

The yearning look passed from the princess' face. She gave an imperious order.

"Go, now! Bring him within the walls, that his hurts be tended!"

Bauna hesitated. "It is scarce proper," he dared to remonstrate. "His garb is that of a common fellow. Yet, there might be found for him employment——"

The princess stamped an impatient foot.

"Am I a beggar, that a servant questions my bidding? Go, I say!" —she glanced warningly at her maidens—"and let those who value my service refrain from babbling!"

So they brought Jai Singh, returned to his own country with a caravan from the North, within the walls of the palace.

HASAMURTI was the first to guess her mistress' secret. She could read the tokens—the listlessness, the sighings, the questions as to the young man's welfare. Needless to say, the affair had her warm-hearted sympathy.

He was recovered from his hurts, she said; but if her mistress wished to hear from his own lips, there was her room; she could arrange a meeting. Alipriya should know nothing. Bauna would grumble, but be silent as the grave. What were her dear mistress' orders?

The princess hid her face, but the color flushed like dawn over her throat and bosom.

"Hasamurti!—that it be soon!" she whispered.

So at night, when the palace was asleep, Jai Singh for the first time stood in the princess' presence. The fragrance of her loveliness held him

spellbound. She seemed to him Lakshmi, born from the foam of the ocean; wonderful as moonlight streaming into a forest glade. For a time he remained speechless, worshiping her beauty.

But though she knew that she loved him, she remembered that she was Aparajita the Princess, and a frown spread over her countenance like a dark ripple over the surface of a pool.

"What manner of man art thou," she questioned haughtily, "to stare so rudely? To stand before royalty without obeisance?"

Jai Singh regained his courage, and laughed softly.

"Lady," he said, "must I be blamed if I marvel tongue-tied at the splendor of the lotus? As for who I am, Jai Singh is my name, of thine own race, a Rajput. As for the obeisance, it may be that I also am entitled to it. For verily, I believe that I, too, am a prince!"

It was her turn to regard him, wonder-struck.

"Thou!—a prince? Did a soothsayer tell thee this?"

Jai Singh laughed again.

"Nay, I have weightier proof than that! A horoscope and a seal worn round my neck since childhood."

"Where wast thou born, then?"

"As I think, lady, within this very palace. So the woman told me who tended me from infancy. She was my nurse, and when disaster came she stole away by night and fled northward, taking me with her. Now that I am grown, I have returned to seek my fortune."

From a pouch slung around his neck he drew the paper and the seal, and showed them to her. She was at once all eagerness. Her heart beat high; for though a princess has been known to love a common man, it is more seemly that she should have a prince for her lover.

"Let us take counsel with Bauna the Dwarf," she advised. "He is wise, and has great knowledge of such things."

Bauna came sour-faced; but when he had seen the seal, and heard the young man's story, he lifted his turban from his head, and placed it at Jai Singh's feet.

"Maharaj!" he cried respectfully, "have I permission to speak? A certain matter is now plain to me. Know, then, that Raja Nal Singh, who rules today over Kamber, was the youngest of three brothers. Madhu Singh and Prithi Singh were the names of the two elder. Both of them died within a year: there were those who spoke of poison. Raja Madhu Singh had an infant son: it was given out that the child had died also. Prithi Singh had a daughter——"

The dwarf stopped speaking, and looked across at Aparajita the Princess listening with parted lips.

"And the seal?" Jai Singh questioned, impatiently.

"Maharaj! there is no mistaking it! It is the seal of Raja Madhu Singh—thy father!"

After a moment Jai Singh spoke ruefully:

"It seems, then, that I am a prince without a principality! A beggar prince!—with as little chance of fortune as a beggar!"

Bauna sought to hearten him.

"Who knows? There may yet come opportunity. As I read thy horoscope, at the time of thy birth the 'lord of the first house' was the Lucky Planet. Thy name, likewise, is of good omen—Jai Singh, Lion of Victory."

Jai Singh smiled bitterly.

"A dangerous lion, indeed, with his claws cut!"

Bauna was thinking rapidly.

"They will grow again," he asserted. "Listen, Maharaj! The people wax daily more weary of Raja Nal Singh, his cruelties and his taxes. 'Twould take but little to rouse them. Moreover, there might come help from Aundi," he hinted, craftily,

The princess exclaimed in amazement: "Now do I know that thou art mad, Bauna! How say you?—help from the Chief of Aundi? The state with which my uncle seeks alliance at the price of my maidenhood?"

The dwarf chuckled. "It was not of the chief that I thought, but of Dhola Rai, the leader of his army. It is known that Dhola Rai covets the throne of Aundi; and whither he goes his troops will follow him. It may well be that he would aid us, in the hope that some day we may render him assistance. If it be permitted, Maharaj, I will inquire further into the matter."

AFTER Bauna had withdrawn, Jai Singh turned once more to the princess. His breath came quickly, for he saw her leaning upon her cushions observing him with soft lips breaking into a smile. Youth was hot within him, and fervent worship of her beauty. He fell on his knees before her.

"Behold, I make obeisance, oh my princess!" he said.

Shyly she looked at him through silky lashes; then smiled again as his arms went round her.

"How long have I known thee," she whispered, "oh, thou bold lover?"

He answered: "For a thousand years—or for an instant! I have lost count of time!"

Days passed, and while Bauna was busied with his plans, the lovers met often in Hasamurti's chamber.

Aparajita found him a gallant wooer, and as she lay in his arms her glances entered his heart like diamond arrows tipped with fire. He devised love-names for her delight: Nilanalini, and Alichumbita, Kissed by the Bees.

And then one evening there came a hammering at the outer door. Hasamurti, bursting in, flung herself distraught at her mistress' feet.

"We are lost!" she cried. "Alipriya has learnt our secret and betrayed us! There are soldiers waiting without to take him away!"

Grim-faced, there entered men of the raja's guard. A great seal was set on the door. Jai Singh they dragged to the common prison, Aparajita's farewell words still ringing in his ears: "Beloved! Death is strong: but Love is stronger!"

Under cover of the dusk Bauna the Dwarf slipped past the sentries at the city gates, and hastened to the lonely cave in the hills where Sattyamurti the Saint had his meager lodging.

WHEN next the lovers met, it was in the audience chamber. This was a spacious hall, rich-carpeted, its lofty columns draped with brocades of scarlet and silver. At one end of it, on a marble dais, was a gem-encrusted throne raised upon massive feet of solid gold. From the upper casements stray shafts of sunlight played on the jeweled peacocks flaunting on either arm, rubies and sapphires agleam in their spreading tails. To the base of it were affixed emblems of majesty: buckler and mace and bow glittering with precious stones.

Upon the throne, beneath a pearl-fringed silken canopy, was seated Nal Singh, ruler of Kamber, a man of middle age, but old in vice, his gross body bulging from his vesture of cloth of gold. Under his turban, crowned with a snow-white heron's plume clasped by a brooch of diamonds set round a lustrous topaz, his heavy-lidded eyes glowered sullenly at the scene before him.

Below the throne, ranged in a semicircle, were the nobles of the court. From behind the columns dancing-girls and servitors, huddled together, peered in eager anticipation.

There were those who pitied the princess, as she stood, a flush on her scornful face, shamefully unveiled before the eyes of men. But none dared voice his pity!

For Jai Singh, tall and unflinching beside her, there was, however, nothing of compassion. He was a nobody, a wastrel who had presumed to sully the honor of the state. Let the torturers deal with him!

Nal Singh, the Raja, spoke:

"Their guilt is known to all. They can not deny it. There remains only to decide the manner of their punishment."

Jai Singh cried boldly:

"Oh, King!—grant me this one favor! Visit thy wrath only upon me! For myself I look for neither justice nor mercy at the hands of him who slew Raja Madhu Singh, my father!"

A murmur of amazement, quickly hushed, ran through the assembly. Raja Madhu Singh's rule had been popular. There were many there who hated his successor. The eyes of all were fastened on that young man, dressed like a servant, hurling defiance at a monarch.

There was awed silence. Beside himself with rage and consternation, the tyrant was leaning forward, struggling to speak. His grasp tightened on his velvet-scabbarded sword, and then his voice thundered through the hall.

"Thou dog! Thou lying paramour of a profligate woman! For thy crime and for that false saying thou shalt surely die! As for thy wanton, she shall live scorned like a widow till she does my bidding! And on the day that the kneeling elephant crushes thy body to shapelessness, she shall watch from the balcony! Thou shalt go to thy death alone!"

As the guards turned to lead away their prisoner, the crowd fell apart, and a gaunt figure pressed its way to the center of the hall. The murmur broke out again:

" 'Tis Sattyamurti! Sattyamurti the Saint!"

Sattyamurti stood motionless, the deep-sunken eyes in his serene face fixed on the man on the throne.

"There is a request, oh King!" he said, in a voice that all could hear.

"Is this a time for requests?" the raja scowlingly demanded. "For what dost thou ask, then?"

Sattyamurti answered simply:

"For the life of a man!"

The raja's scowl deepened. "What is thy concern in this matter, oh Sattyamurti?" he demanded again. "Since when do holy men champion the cause of traitors? Is it not given to a king to punish his guilty subjects?"

"Verily, it is within the power of kings to punish their subjects," the saint admitted, dryly. "But the Gods can punish kings! And in this affair I see clearly the trace of the Devil's finger, the chain of calamity starting with a smear of honey upon a doorway——"

"What prating is this?" the raja began impatiently, but the saint would not be stayed.

"Nay, listen, oh King!" he cried. "For to the forging of three links of the chain I was myself a witness. It may be that this world and all things in it are but *Maya*, Illusion—I am not yet assured on the point—or it may be that there will some day come a reckoning. Beware, therefore, how thou addest a link to the chain! Even now thou mayest be thyself in the mouth of Death!"

The raja sat moodily frowning. He knew well that he had enemies; he knew in what veneration Sattyamurti was held by the people. To repeal the death sentence in response to the behest of such a holy man would be accounted an act of kingly clemency. Moreover, there might be an even choicer mode of satisfying his lust for vengeance!

At length he spoke. "Thy request is granted, oh Sattyamurti. Still, his offense justly merits retribution. He shall not die. He shall even be cherished—as a man cherishes a favorite bird, in a cage, with a little rice and water!"

The saint made no reply. He had done what he could.

As the raja finished speaking, there arose a hubbub at the back of the hall, and Bauna the Dwarf was thrust forward. He had been caught that morning, said his captors, hiding in a house in the city.

Before the tittering company, his grotesque countenance distorted by terror, his hands clipped tightly together in a cleft bamboo, he stumbled forward and fell groveling at the foot of the throne.

"Mercy! Great King!" he wailed. "By the cow's tail will I swear that I was ignorant of this misdoing!"

"Thou didst not know, forsooth?"

"I swear it! How could I play a part in such an infamy? I, who am the King's most loyal slave! I, who dare not tread upon even the King's shadow!"

Raja Nal Singh was growing weary. It was time for his morning draft of opium-water.

" 'Twas thy duty to have known, and to have informed those in authority!" he growled, irritably. "I need no fools in my service! Thy goods are forfeit, and let this night find thee far beyond my territory!"

Blubbering his thanksgiving, the dwarf scrambled to his feet. As the court dispersed, the princess cast him a look bitterly reproachful. Even Bauna had forsaken her!

BEFORE dawn, while she lay, dry-eyed and sleepless, with sobbing Hasamurti in her chamber, she heard a tapping at the window.

Bauna crept in. "Lady," he whispered, "the horses are ready, and the guards are bribed. But there is need for haste."

The princess answered him proudly:

"I deal not with cowards! How should I know that this is not a trap set by thy master?"

Bauna replied, patiently: "I pray you, believe me, lady! There is little time for explaining—but could a man who was himself a prisoner help others?"

Still she wavered. "While Jai Singh, the Prince, still lives, I leave not the palace!" she protested.

Bauna grinned. "Gold is a sure key to a prison-lock. He awaits us with the horses."

She believed him, then—and before the morrow's sun had mounted spear-high they came in sight of the white tents of Dhola Rai's encampment spreading across the plain.

ON THE day and at the hour declared propitious by the astrologers the army marched against Kamber.

At daybreak Jai Singh and Dhola Rai had pledged mutual fidelity, had exchanged turbans, dipping their hands in salt. The troops were in high fettle: the omen had been favorable, a partridge calling from the left.

It made a brave sight—that mighty host surging forward to the din of the monster kettle-drums, trumpets and cymbals. Jai Singh rode in the forefront, leading the horsemen armed with swords and lances. Round the great orange standard was a special escort. These were picked warriors clad in yellow, sprinkled with saffron-water, their faces stained with turmeric, vowed to the death. They were merry, for they said among themselves: "Ere nightfall we shall taste the cups of sparkling wine served by the lovely Apsaras in Surya-loka, the mansion of the Sun!"

Behind them, led by Dhola Rai, marched bowmen and pikemen in thick quilted corselets. Some of them carried sharp-edged metal disks and war-rockets to be launched against the enemy horse.

Then came the elephants, clanking in body armor, tolling their brazen bells, their *howdahs* packed with javelin-men. There would be work for the lumbering monsters in the last

assault, trampling over the heaps of slain to ram the city gates.

The rear was formed of a noisy, straggling mob—camels and baggage-carts and the riffraff of an army; soothsayers and astrologers, mendicants and dancers—a looting rabble.

On Moti, the huge war-elephant, rode Aparajita the Princess. Against her lover, minded to leave her in safety, she had turned rebellious. Facing him, splendid in chain-mail blazoned with the sun-emblem, she had cried mockingly:

"Nay, but I come with thee! Am I the first woman of the Rajputs to follow her lord to battle?"

So she had prevailed, and climbed to the rocking *howdah*, where Bauna the Dwarf might shelter her with his leathern buckler.

AT NOONDAY battle was joined upon the sun-parched plain before Kamber. Great was the slaughter, but from the first the fortune of the day was with Jai Singh. Word had gone forth of who had been his father, and Raja Nal Singh's troops had little stomach for the fight.

For a time the battle swayed; swords clashed, and man ripped man with the dreaded "tiger's-claw," while twanging war-bows clouded the sky with arrows. Then a rumor flew through the ranks that Raja Nal Singh, desperate of victory, lay dead within his citadel, slain by his own hand. Outflanked and driven in upon the fortifications, the enemy turned and fled, pursued by shouting horsemen.

The trumpets blared the call for the final onset. Jai Singh, sheathing his dripping blade, climbed to his lady's side. Moti, the elephant, wallowed across the moat to a patch of firm, dry land before the fortress gate.

There arose, then, imminent danger to the princess. Arrows were raining from the battlements, rattling on leathern bucklers, bristling in the *howdah*-front like quills upon a porcupine. Ahead was the massive, heavy-timbered gate, studded with iron spikes which Moti dared not face. In vain his driver strove to urge him forward, prodding behind the ear his steel-shod goad. Swinging his trunk, Moti searched this way and that, but nowhere could he find even a truss of grass to serve for a forehead-pad against those threatening barbs.

From the battlements the arrows still rained down.

"Bauna!" the princess called; "is there no way to force for us the gate?"

For a moment longer Bauna stayed perplexed. Then, with the laugh of a brave man facing death, he gave her answer.

"There is a way, oh my Princess!" he said.

They watched him leap from the *howdah*, shout to Moti an order; too late they understood his sacrifice! The slate-gray trunk shot out, coiled round that valiant body, heaved it aloft for a brow-pad, obtained a purchase! The soul of Bauna the Dwarf joined the souls of the warrior-heroes in Surya-loka—and the gate crashed open!

THE sun was setting when Sattyamurti reached the bluff above the sacred river. It was the hour for his evening meditation.

And whilst he stood there, scanning the distant hills, there slunk from the darkened mango-grove behind him one of the fleeing soldiery, a lowering giant, his garments stained with blood. He halted, and with opium-reddened eyeballs glared at the saint.

"A curse on thee!" he snarled, "thou meddlesome old crow! But for thine interference, Jai Singh, the upstart, had been dead ere now, and I not masterless!" His hand whipped to his sword-hilt.

Sattyamurti turned to him, his arms flung wide.

"Behold, the last link in the chain!" he affirmed. "Strike, then! I fear not!"

The sword-point flickered to its mark.

Before the eyes of the dying saint there passed a vision. He saw first illimitable space, through which a cold wind blew. He saw the planets wheeling on their courses, beyond them a great white light. Then these, too, vanished.

Gasping, he raised himself a little on one elbow.

"Lo, there is nothing!" he murmured. "No Good!—No Evil!—Only *Maya*, Illusion!"

And so he died.

YET, had they known this, Jai Singh and Aparajita would have deemed him mistaken.

Often they mourned the death of Bauna the Dwarf; but they had other things to think of—the cares and joys of ruling, children, and the pleasant government of a house.

For they were young, and in love with each other, and the world seemed to them very good.

Strange Was the Death of the Antiquary

AN OCCURRENCE IN AN ANTIQUE SHOP

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

"WELL, no, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"There seems to be something wrong with the thing, but I can't tell you what it is, nor why I feel that there's some difference about it."

Morrison handed the carving to Clavering, who took it and examined it carefully. It was an antique wood of a pirate in the act of plunging his cutlas into a hapless sailor. The pirate's left arm was extended straight out from his shoulder much in the attitude of a fencer; his right arm was crooked at the elbow, and in his hand he clutched a long knife which just touched the sailor's bared breast. The expression on the pirate's face was positively fiendish; the face of the kneeling sailor was a picture of abject terror. The two stood on a block of wood cut to resemble the flooring of a ship. There was dust on the carving.

"Humph!"

"Well?"

"What a peculiar obsession, Morrison! There isn't a thing different with this piece since I last saw it."

"It isn't an obsession, Clavering. Isn't the pirate's weapon nearer to the sailor's breast?"

"Not a fraction of an inch!"

"Clavering! You're not lying—just to ease me?"

"Nonsense! You've been reading again—reading some of that——"

"I have not!"

"But, my dear Morrison——"

"I tell you I'm just the same as ever. It's just—just—well, you know. Tell me, didn't you really notice any difference in the attitude of the figures?"

"No, I didn't."

"I'm still dubious."

"Oh, I say, Morrison! Don't let's discuss it."

"As you will, Clavering, but you have no idea how the thing affects me. It's so strangely suggestive."

"Suggestive? Of what?"

"Of—nothing. Won't you have a whisky and soda before you go?"

"No, I must go, Morrison."

Clavering stood up. He yawned, then reached for his hat and stick. The two men walked slowly through the shadowy antique shop to the street door. On the threshold they paused. Morrison sighed. Clavering struck a match and lit his cigarette.

"I wouldn't let that carving bother me any more, if I were you, Morrison. It's not exactly good for you, you know."

"It's not bothering me; I'm just wondering, that's all."

"You're trying fairly hard to conceal your nervousness, Morrison, but you can't deceive me. You'd better stop, old fellow, stop worrying."

"It's easy for you to say. By God! I know that carving is not the same as when I got it."

Morrison shuffled back through the aisles in his shop to his rooms beyond. His bedroom slippers made a curious flapping noise.

THE next night Clavering found Morrison waiting for him, the image grasped tightly in his hand.

"No doubt about it, Clavering. The pirate's cutlas is plainly sticking in the sailor's breast."

"You're seeing things, Morrison."

"Well, look at it; see for yourself."

"There's absolutely nothing the matter with it!"

"Then what's the matter with me?"

"You're overworked; under a nervous strain, that's all."

"Absolute nonsense."

"Oh, well!"

"That weapon is going to keep on entering the sailor's body; when it's passed through, something will happen."

"To the wooden figure?"

"Perhaps; who knows?"

Morrison turned the image over in his hand, then placed it on the table within easy reach.

"Did you ever notice that their faces had changed?"

"Oh, come, Morrison! You're overdoing it."

"That's your view, Clavering; I've got mine."

"By the way, Morrison, where did you get the thing, if I may ask?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No. It was here in the shop one day; I swear I'd never seen it before."

"Odd."

"Yes, it is odd—too odd to please me."

"Why don't you burn the thing?"

"I can't bring myself to do it. In some cursed way it reminds me of something."

Clavering shot a quick glance at the clock. "Is that 9 o'clock, Morrison?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I've got to go; I've an engagement at 9:30."

"Oh."

"If I were you I'd put that carving in storage."

MR. SOAMES CLAVERING made a belated appearance at his club three nights later. He had no sooner made his entrance than a young antiquary, James Herrick, rose and made his way over to him.

"I say, Clavering, I hear Morrison's dead."

"Yes, he's dead."

"What happened to him? Why,

just a week ago I bought a rare Japanese print from him."

"He had rather a peculiar end."

"You saw him die?"

"No. No one saw him die. He lay dead in his shop when I came there last night. In his hand he held this." Clavering pulled the wooden image from his pocket and extended it to his friend. "Examine the thing, will you, Herrick? See anything queer about it?"

"Well, it's an odd subject to carve, I should say, but beyond that there's nothing wrong. Had I the say, I should have had the cutlas in the body of the sailor; it would maintain a better proportion in the carving."

"True. It's being just touching the sailor makes it rather awkward."

"You say Morrison was holding this?"

"Yes. Odd, eh? But wait until you hear all the story. He found the image in his shop one day, hadn't the least idea where it came from, so he says, and was confident that he had never seen it before. At once he told me that he had an uncanny feeling of fright when he looked at the thing. The next night he insisted that the point of the cutlas had entered the body of the sailor, and that the expressions of the faces had changed. He hinted that the thing suggested something; I gathered that it brought to mind something in his past life that was very similar. And he dreaded the movement of the weapon into the sailor's body, going so far as to state that something would happen when the cutlas passed through the body."

"By the way, Clavering, have you ever noticed the peculiar resemblance that the face of the sailor has to Morrison?"

"I have, Herrick; I've wondered about it. I'm told that Morrison was once a seaman, perhaps even a pirate of some sort."

"Who knows?"

"No one. Nobody seems to know much of Morrison."

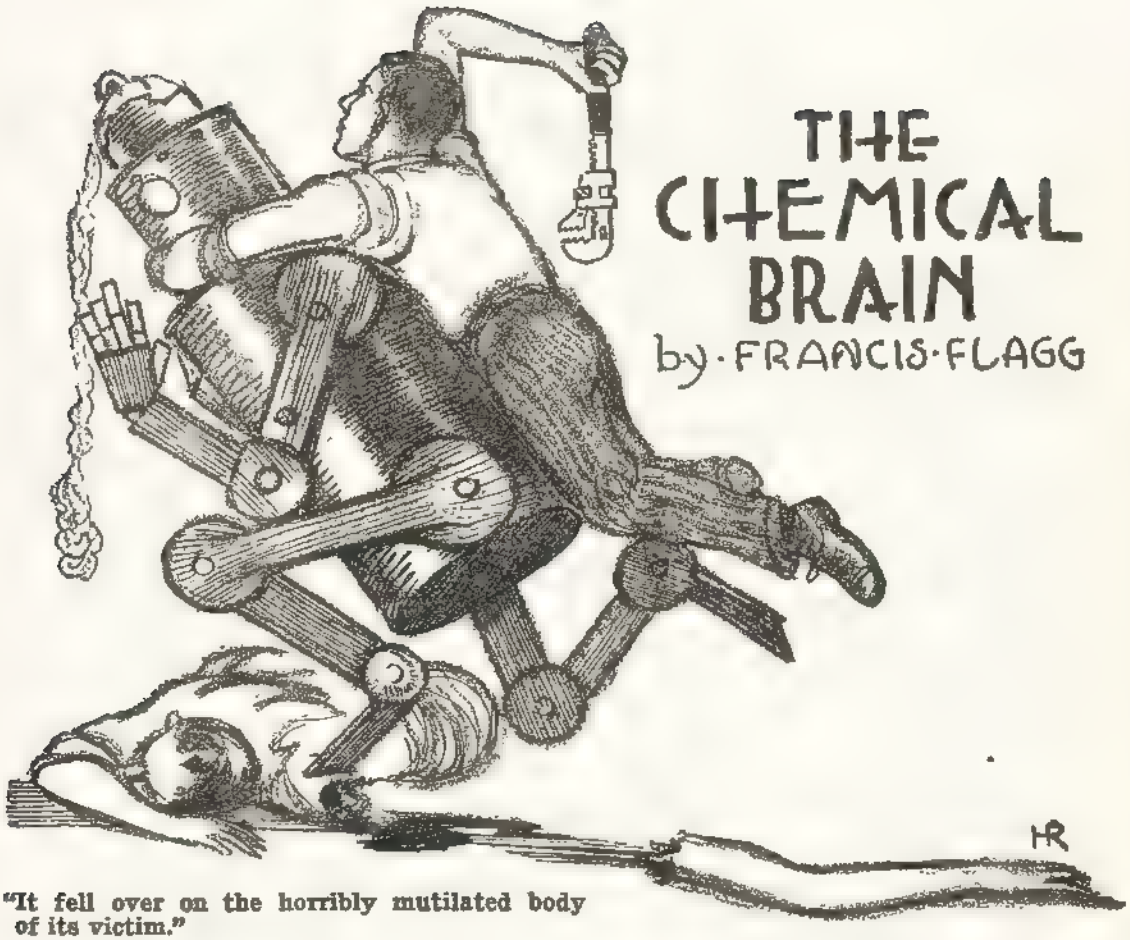
"Go on with the story."

"Well, Morrison insisted that, night after night, the cutlas was being surely plunged into the sailor's body, and I was fully as insistent in my ridicule of his strange obsession. Last night when I came to see him I found him dead, with the image in his hand, as I told you. As far as I know, the cause of death is unknown, with heart trouble of an obscure sort plausible. But there was a queer burnt mark on Morrison's breast; I'll be damned if it didn't call to mind some queer stories I've heard about witchcraft. Imagine that, in this enlightened age! I took the image from him. It was just the way it is now, but in a moment I'll show you something."

"Perhaps Morrison was the victim of some subconscious obsession; perhaps at some time in his life he killed a sailor under similar conditions and his conscience conjured his past up before him?"

"It's just plausible. As I said, no one seems to know much about Morrison. At any rate, this morning I got to examining the figure. In the first place it isn't antique. It resembles a great deal of the work done by a group of old sailors down along the Thames, in Limehouse district.

"In the second place—bend closer, Herrick—four-fifths of this cutlas is entirely free of dust, from the point toward the hilt, and if you look closely at the point where the cutlas would naturally have entered the sailor's breast, you will see a faint oval line of compressed dust!"



THE CHEMICAL BRAIN

by · FRANCIS · FLAGG

"It fell over on the horribly mutilated body of its victim."

WALTER PARSONS is dead. At the inquest the jury returned a verdict to the effect that the deceased came to his death by being accidentally crushed under a machine with which he was experimenting. But that is not true. It ignores several peculiar things which the panel of men could not understand and before which their matter-of-fact minds recoiled in horror. Now I do not wish to be misunderstood. Perhaps the verdict, as rendered, was the only sane one that could be returned. Nevertheless, if ever a man was murdered, that man was Walter Parsons. Let me put the incredible facts on paper. I do not expect to be believed, and yet . . .

LAST February I was coming out of an employment agency in Pasadena, California, when a vigorous-looking gentleman of about fifty years accosted me.

"Pardon me, but I overheard what you said to the lady inside. You are a machinist?"

"Yes."

"And looking for work?"

"I am."

"Would you consider a hundred and fifty dollars a month and your board?"

"You've hired me."

He smiled briefly. "My name is Rowan, Captain Rowan. And yours?"

"Lester. John Lester."

He motioned me into the front seat of a Cadillac touring-car.

"Where shall we call for your things?"

"I haven't any."

He raised his eyebrows.

"They're pawned, sold, gone," I explained. "I was down to my last thin dime when you hired me."

He answered nothing to this but drove to a men's furnishing-store on Colorado Boulevard.

"Here is fifty dollars, an advance on your wages. Buy what you think you'll need."

When my purchases were placed in the rear of the car, we drove out South Fair Oaks, almost to South Pasadena, and turned into the driveway of a fairly large estate on the east side of the road. The grounds were quite extensive, I noticed, and surrounded by a low stone wall. Palm trees bordered the drive that led to the garage, and orange trees grew in serried rows to right and left. The house itself was an old-fashioned wooden residence with wide verandas on each side. In the rear of the house was a brick building.

"This," said the captain, throwing open the door, "is the machine-shop and laboratory. You will notice that the machine-shop is small but quite well equipped for ordinary work. Parts that can not be made here will, of course, be ordered from larger establishments. Your work will be mostly assembling those parts and turning out certain small devices according to plans and specifications I shall give you."

He took me to my room on the second floor of the house and left me to bathe and shave.

At dinner that evening I met Walter Parsons. He was a clever-looking man of middle age, a chemist, I gathered, with a private income—nothing particularly striking about him, unless it was the feeling he gave of being very meticulous, very correct. The third person at the table was Captain Rowan's sister, Genevieve, who was also the housekeeper and cook, as there were no servants. She was one of those women whom at first glance you dismiss as uninteresting. At second glance you decide they are actually plain. After that you pay them little attention, and are never certain when it was you discovered they were beautiful.

The captain sat at the head of his table and talked easily and naturally. "Have you ever read Lucian Larkin?" he asked me.

"No, never," I confessed.

"You know to whom I refer?"

"I'm afraid not."

He made a wry face. "Such is fame. Well, my boy, Lucian Larkin was an astronomer, the director until his death of Mount Lowe Observatory on the peak over there. But not only was he an astronomer; he was also a great mystic, the author of several wonderful books, not the least of which is *The Matchless Altar of the Soul.* You must read it, by all means."

Parsons gave a little laugh. He looked slyly at Genevieve Rowan, and then as if guilty of an indiscretion glanced quickly away.

"Not that you'll understand it," he mocked. "It is doubtful whether Larkin himself understood half of what he wrote."

The captain smiled tolerantly. "Walter is a materialist. He doesn't believe in the theory of a great mind back of all manifestation."

"Who could?" countered Parsons. He turned to me with the little sudden gesture that was characteristic of him. "It is so evident," he said, "that the mind of man is nothing but the sum of his bodily organization. When that organization breaks down—puff!—where is your mind?"

"And I might observe," replied the captain, "that when the dynamo

breaks down, ditto, where is your power? Your very argument defeats you, Walter. Man is a machine. Very well. When he functions properly he is medium for mind, thought. When he breaks down, his mind, thought, goes—where? Into oblivion? Yes, the same oblivion that engulfs electricity when the generator fails to work; the same nothingness that claims radio waves when the machine fails to send them or the receiving-set to pick them up. Don't be absurd!"

I listened to them argue, rather puzzled as to what it was all about.

SEVERAL days later Parsons and I were in the machine-shop together and I expressed my bewilderment to him. "You see, Lester," he explained, "there are really two schools of thought. One school—the material school to which I belong—holds that our so-called mind is the result of bodily nerves and organs functioning a certain way. The other school—to which the captain subscribes—holds that mind is something exterior to our bodily organization, merely expressing itself through our brains and directing our activity."

As I worked I pondered these two concepts. Never before had I given such things serious thought. Now they interested me. Why? Because I sensed that in some fashion they were connected with the work I was doing. The captain as an electrical engineer, Parsons as a chemist, were engaged in some profound experiment. This much I gathered from their conversation. But what sort of an experiment? Now and then Captain Rowan talked to me freely. For days at a time he would work in his laboratory, hardly uttering a word; then for some reason he would open up and become almost loquacious.

"Consider this fact, Lester. Within the entire range of the telespectroscope and telecamera, where their range is so immense that one hundred million giant suns in space are now photographed, there is no entity able to add to itself but mind, thinking thoughts that have never been thought before."

I tried to grasp his meaning. "Just what is your definition of mind, sir?"

"That of Larkin. Electrons are the first manifestation of mind. They alone have been created. All else have been formed by an incredible number of varying combinations of electrons."

"I'm afraid I do not understand."

"It is very simple. Back of all manifestation is a cosmic mind—call it creator, if you will; I prefer to call it director. This director creates electrons. Electrons combine to form all other kinds of matter—the molecule, the atom. Ninety kinds of atoms are now known to chemists. Do you know what determines the atom of an element?"

"No."

"Well, what kind of an atom shall appear in space depends on four basic factors: number of electrons in revolution; specific speed of revolution; distance of orbits from the center; and directions of motions."

Parsons looked up from his chemical labors. "That is all true, Lester," he said, "but don't let the captain sweep you away by a statement of facts into an acceptance of a cosmic mind. Lucian Larkin was a great astronomer, and a scientist, but beyond a certain point—what we have verified with our instruments—he enters the realm of pure speculation. There is not one iota of proof that mind exists distinct from the body."

Captain Rowan laughed. "No? Then tell me: What if the hand of a person begins suddenly to write words at a rate ten to twenty times faster than normal, in a handwriting other than his own, upon wise and

lofty subjects not heard of before; sometimes even in a language of which the owner of the hand is ignorant—tell me, what guides that hand?"

"There is usually fraud back of this automatic writing, deceit of some sort," replied Parsons. "In the few cases where it seems to be genuine, it is due, doubtless, to the subconscious mind of man."

"But if the person doing the automatic writing has no knowledge, either conscious or subconscious, of Latin or Greek, or even of Sanskrit (for I assure you whole reams have been written in Sanskrit), and the writing should be in any one of those languages—what then?"

Parsons shrugged his shoulders. "Still there is no valid reason for assuming an overmind or director as does Larkin." He turned to me. "Undoubtedly there are some mysterious things in connection with psychic phenomena which are baffling, but to use those mysterious things as a base from which to launch into wild and irrational speculations is not scientific. You will appreciate this better if you make an earnest study of the new psychology, behaviorism. Even James and Jung and Freud are being seriously challenged by John B. Watson. It begins to appear that our viscera are the directors of mind; that our memory, our so-called subconscious, is the result of habit, of conditioning. What you need to read, Lester, is Watson's book, *Behaviorism*, and leave Larkin to the metaphysicians."

That night I was permitted to see something curious. In coming through the hallway from the rear of the house to the front, I surprized Parsons and Genevieve Rowan in the front room. I was ahead of the captain and distinctly saw her in the arms of the chemist. Whether the captain saw the embrace, the quick springing apart, I do not know. The room was but dimly lighted, twilight prevailing, and the electric lights not yet turned on. It is possible he did not. At any rate he made no comment. Beyond surmising that Miss Rowan and Parsons were secretly sweethearts, I should have given little thought to the occurrence, if it had not been for what followed. Coming down the back steps to the kitchen after bathing and changing clothes, I surprized another tableau, more startling by far than the first. This time it was the captain and his sister. He held her above both elbows, at arm's length, shaking her furiously. I could not see her face, as her back was toward me, but his own was snarling, murderous.

"By God!" he growled, "I'll kill him first! Do you understand? And you too!"

I retreated up the steps. What did it mean? That the captain had seen Parsons embrace his sister? But what of that? Weren't Parsons and he friends, fellow experimenters? Then why the terrible anger I had witnessed, the seething rage? I could not understand it.

At the dinner table Genevieve Rowan was her usual quiet, well-poised self; her brother's face was placid. Had I imagined the scene in the kitchen, exaggerated it? No, that was impossible. But perhaps I was mistaken in linking it up with the earlier scene in the parlor.

Parsons seemed unaware of anything amiss. He baited the captain on his mysticism in his usual mocking manner. But as the days passed I became aware of something tense, something electric in the air. Two or three times I caught the captain watching Parsons when he thought himself unobserved. His face didn't change expression at those times, no; nor his eyes; yet the fixity of his stare, something about its utter immobility, chilled the blood in my veins.

I told myself I was imagining things, developing a case of nerves; only at this time I became dynamically conscious of Genevieve Rowan herself. Her ashen hair was suddenly full of glints that caught the eye. Her rounded figure held an allure that was hard to resist. "Don't be a fool," I told myself. "The woman is gray-headed; she is fifty, if she is a day." Yet in spite of such reasoning I knew her to be beautiful, desirable. And other things I knew—half suspicions, half certainties—gleaned from a word, a gesture, a step at midnight; the creak of a loose board, of an opening door. No, I won't tell what those things were! They are too horrible to put on paper, too terrible; yes, and too sad. Now that the captain is in his grave, Parsons dead, and only Genevieve alive — Genevieve who looks and walks about like a forlorn ghost—it is well that such things should be forgotten. Only I know that a real cause, a real lust for murder existed—existed and was glutted with blood. But enough of that!

In the workshop a strange machine grew under our hands as day succeeded day. Parts came from distant factories and I put them together. Other pieces of machinery I made myself according to plans furnished me by the captain and Parsons. The machine was mounted on wheels; incorporated in its body was an especially constructed electric dynamo. The captain wired the various parts, and in what he called the backbone of the ponderous, tapering mechanism he placed at intervals of three inches crystals derived from a saturated solution of Rochelle salt.

"Perhaps," said Parsons to me, "you have heard of singing crystals?"

"No," I replied, "I haven't."

"Well," he said, "it has long been known that lopsided crystals such as these have a certain effect on a ray of light passing through them. If you squeeze or pinch them, positive electricity collects at one part of the crystal and negative electricity at another. Now if you connect these two points you get a current. The discoverer of this interesting idiosyncrasy on the part of crystals was Professor Curie of Paris, who, in conjunction with his wife, later discovered radium. Behold!"

He pressed one crystal between a thumb and forefinger and its neighbor shrieked as if in pain. He laughed at my astonishment.

"One of these little crystals is enough to run two hundred telephones."

I could hardly credit it.

"Yes," the captain assured me, "that is true. But in this case they are going to be the little bodies which receive and send messages up and down the vertebræ of our machine, and to various parts of its body."

"Body!"

"Yes, body. For this is an iron creature we're building, a metal man."

I thought him joking. "It doesn't look much like a human being," I said.

"And has it to?"

"Lester," said Parsons, "is under the impression—the quite common impression—that to build a machine which will function like a man one must duplicate the human body."

"As in Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein*," commented the captain, "the artificial man complete from nerves, muscles, lungs, liver, to a fluid that circulated like blood."

"Exactly," agreed Parsons. "Only it had no soul and killed its inventor."

Both men laughed briefly.

"The concept is a mediæval one," went on the captain. "For you must know, my boy, that the human body is not the perfect mechanism

the average person thinks it is. A skilled mechanic would be ashamed to turn out a machine as faulty in parts as is his own body."

"Perhaps so," I retorted, "but I notice that man is not able to improve on nature."

"There you are mistaken. Wherever man has been able to compete with nature by means of his machines he has bettered her. Take, for instance, the process on which all life depends, the storing up of solar energy in the green leaf. The leaf is not able to catch and hold more than one per cent of the radiant energy that falls upon it from the sun. In that respect it is much less efficient than any of man's machines. A steam engine can turn into mechanical work at least twelve per cent of the heat energy fed to it in the shape of coal, besting the natural process eleven to one."

"And nature," chimed in Parsons, "has never yet proved itself capable of producing a human being that could not make mistakes. Man has come pretty near doing that very thing. Have you ever read the play, *R. U. R.*?"

"No."

"Well, a foreign playwright wrote a play called by those letters, which were an abbreviation for 'Russum's Universal Robots.'"

"Robots?" I interrupted. "I believe I do know what you mean now. I've heard that word before."

"Of course you have. It's become a part of the English language. Well, the playwright's idea was quite fantastic and absurd. Who ever heard of Robots, mechanical men? Nobody. Yet at Washington, D. C., stands what is called the Brass Brain. Men step in front of it and ask questions. Talk of your ancient oracles! On the answers of this modern one men stake their lives and millions of dollars."

"Good Lord," I breathed, "what is it?"

"Nothing much. Only a machine that calculates how high and low tides will be in every port of the world today, tomorrow, and fourteen years from now."

I gaped at him.

"But why continue? There are in existence machines which turn switches, dig ditches, answer telephones, steer ships, come and go at the command of the human voice, and perform numerous duties. Of course these machines are not all assembled in one piece or place. They are distinct inventions, such as the adding-machine, the electric crane, or that latest marvel of them all, the calculating-machine which works out in a few hours or weeks or months intricate problems that would take learned men ten, yes, and even twenty years to solve. And the machine makes no mistakes."

"You mean," I said, enthralled, "that in some sort of fashion those machines are Robots?"

"Isn't it obvious? Consider, Lester: What would be the result if all those automatic brains, hands and feet were incorporated into one body!"

"My God!"

"And the brains directed the hands and feet?"

"Impossible!"

"That is the retort the scientist and inventor has always met with. Now this machine——"

"This machine?"

"Why, yes, the one we're building. It will demonstrate the correctness of the captain's and my theory."

I stared at him in a species of horror. "You mean," I gasped, "that this thing here"—I waved at the ponderous mass—"is intended to be a Robot, a metal man?"

He adjusted a crystal before answering. "We hope so."

"But, good Lord!" I exclaimed; "you're making a big mistake!"

"Indeed; how so?"

"Because no matter how much you give your machine chemical brains it won't be able to start its own thinking processes."

"That is true. Man has not yet been able to build a machine that can think. The ones I referred to above all operate at a note of music, the push of a button, the sound of a voice. We recognize that fact. The problem engrossing the captain and me is this: Can we build a mechanical, a chemical brain delicate enough to respond to thought as it now does to sound or other stimuli? Can we give such a command as this to our chemical and mechanical brain: 'Keep the motor running; every four hours feed it gas and oil'? Can we do more than that? Can we set our machine certain tasks to do, fixing those tasks in its 'mind,' and then going away and forgetting it? Don't you see what that would mean? It would mean the creation of a genuine Robot, an independent metal creature that would work without supervision, eat its daily ration of fuel, and never get sick or go on strike."

But I was not to be swept away altogether by mere oratory.

"You forget," I said, "that they would break down from time to time; that human beings would then have to build others."

"At first, yes. But what if after awhile we created thousands of them whose specialty it was to repair their worn-out or broken-down brother Robots? They would not have to resemble each other in the least, you understand, save in their mental capacity to receive certain commands and keep on obeying them. Once you had your workers toiling at producing for humanity, your repair machines busy at repairing and building the workers, what more supervision would man have to exercise over them than the average boss does over workers now? Indeed it ought to be possible to create a machine that will be all brain, vast, godlike in comparison to the ones that toil and repair, and imbue it with the thought of keeping the Robots working and the wheels of industry turning; and there you are!"

The idea was horrible to me. I couldn't entertain it without protest.

"But if man started such a process going," I whispered, horrified, "he might not be able to check it at will. What if the Robots grew out of hand, built themselves into great armies, turned on man and destroyed him?" I wiped the sweat from my brow. "Good God, Parsons!" I said; "such inventions fly in the face of nature. They can bring humanity no good. Better leave well enough alone."

He shook me by the shoulder scoffingly. "All progress man has ever made, from tilling the ground to talking over radios, has been a flying in the face of nature."

The captain, who had said nothing for some time, now broke in.

"There is no need to be alarmed, my boy. Those Robots which Parsons visualizes would be the product of mind, therefore obedient to it."

I MADE no reply to him; but from the day of the above conversation my interest in the work I was doing, in the amazing experiment that was being undertaken, became intensified.

The machine grew under our hands until it was six feet tall. It stood, as I have said before, on rollers, the rollers being encased in caterpillar belts. At the base it was about four feet around, tapering to twelve inches at the top. It was built, not in one piece but in segments, jointed ball-and-socket fashion, with various springs and rubber cushions separating the different parts. To describe it further is beyond me; only it had two armlike pistons, one on each side, possessed

a central electric dynamo, and was wired so profusely as to make the interior seem a tangled mass of cord.

Came the day when the brain of this monstrous mechanism was put in place. The part that fitted into what I must call the neck was made of aluminum, all except the cover, which was transparent glass and screwed into place. A small cylinder, which emitted an intense bluish light when brought into contact with electricity, was inside the aluminum bowl. The captain connected the necessary wires. His face was very red. I watched breathlessly as Parsons filled the hollow globe with a glutinous mixture of opaque liquid. My hands unconsciously gripped each other until they hurt while I waited for something to happen, but nothing did. He screwed the glass cap into place and stepped down and back from the machine.

"It is finished," he said quietly, looking at the captain; "finished—and ready."

As if his words were a knockout blow, the captain fell.

"Quick!" cried Parsons to me, kneeling beside him, "a glass of water! The excitement has been too much for him. He's fainted!"

But he hadn't fainted. When the doctor reached the house he was dead.

"That heart of his," explained the physician. "I told him to be careful, to avoid any sudden strain or excitement."

Genevieve Rowan was beside herself with grief. In front of us all Parsons put his arms around her.

"There, there, dearest. It is terrible, yes. But it may be for the best."

Was it relief I saw on his face? I scorned myself for the thought, and yet, in spite of the fact that they had been absorbed in a kindred experiment, working together harmoniously enough in the laboratory, I was conscious of the fact that all was not as it should be between the two men. How did I know this when I never heard a word of ill-feeling pass between them, never intercepted a glance that could be actually interpreted as inimical? I can't say. But I knew it instinctively, as I knew other things on which their antagonism was based: things as to which my lips are forever sealed.

On the back porch I found a large notebook. It had evidently dropped from the captain's pocket as we carried him into the house. I slipped it into my pocket, intending to give it to Miss Rowan later, and continued on my way to the laboratory to lock things up. What I saw there drove all thought of the notebook from my mind. A strange glow was radiating from the glass cap which topped the head of the machine. It was reddish-blue in color. Evidently the chemical solution contained in the aluminum bowl gave rise to this phenomenon.

Fascinated, I climbed the short stepladder and peered through the glass. The glutinous mixture was pulsing as if alive. It was now a gray, speckled mass shot through with red streamers. The sight startled me. The gooseflesh rose on my skin, and I had that familiar sensation of the scalp which people mean when they say their hair stands on end.

I left the laboratory abruptly, in my haste forgetting to fasten the door. It was my intention to tell Parsons of what I had seen, but he was still in the parlor comforting the captain's sister; so I continued on my way upstairs.

I had just begun to strip when the deep purring of a motor came from the rear yard. This was strange, as I had heard no car entering the driveway. My room was in the rear of the house; so it was possible for me to glance out the open window to observe who it was. Darkness had fallen. The motor, by

the sound of it, was right under me, near the back door. I could hear it, but the thick foliage of a pepper tree prevented me from looking straight down. Baffled, I stepped back, and as I did so someone flung open the back door with considerable force.

"What's the matter, Lester?" called Parsons' voice.

"It isn't I," I shouted down; "I'm upstairs."

"Then who the devil——"

A ponderous weight was dragging across the kitchen floor. My heart leapt suffocatingly in my throat. A floor board cracked like a pistol shot somewhere beneath me.

"I say," came Parsons' voice, "I say, what's the matter here? What's the—oh my God!"

His voice went up in a terrible crescendo; went up—and ceased. I snatched up the first thing beneath my hand—a large stilson wrench—and leapt down the stairs. Someone was screaming like mad, and the house was rocking under the impact of stamping blows. In the passageway I nearly trampled on a prone body—that of Genevieve Rowan—and had to hurdle it to reach the kitchen.

Parsons had evidently turned on the lights as he entered, for the room was well lighted. At the sight of what I saw strength nearly left me. I stood as if petrified. There before me—believe it or not, as you like—was lying the crushed and bleeding body of Walter Parsons, his features fixed in a set grimace of stark horror and agony, while crouching over him like some fearsome prehistoric monster was the metal man he had helped to make, the hideous Robot, driving its short, armlike pistons into his still quivering flesh.

The sight sickened me. My bowels turned to water. The awful monstrosity was bent over like a bow, screaming as if in rage, and the pulsing matter under the glass cap on the top of its head sent out its reddish-blue tinge and glared at me like an evil eye.

Insane with terror I showered blow after blow on it with my stilson wrench. The glass cap broke; the glutinous mass rolled out and pulsed on the floor like a living thing in its death throes. Even as it fell the whole body of the machine straightened up convulsively. Through all its sinuous wires and lengths ran a sighing sob. Then with a terrible crash it fell over on the already horribly mutilated body of its victim and was still.

I waited to see no more. I turned and ran. I remember that I screamed as I ran.

THAT is all. I told them everything at the inquest. Nay, more, I showed them what was written in Captain Rowan's notebook, the one I had picked up, put in my pocket, forgotten, and then accidentally glanced at later—only two pages of writing in the captain's almost illegible script. They read as follows:

> Within the entire realm of the vast and intricate modern science of electricity, there is nothing more wonderful and awe-inspiring than induction, action at a distance without a conducting wire. This fact is the base of the wireless systems of telegraphy and telephony, and of all electrodynamic machinery as dynamos and motors, the bases of electric lights and electric railroads. But see this. . . . I am convinced that we actually think by induction.

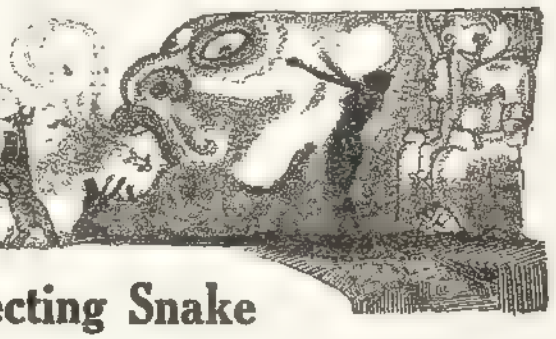
And underneath this palpable quotation, which is credited to Lucian Larkin, was written these words:

> If this be true, then man's mind is more than the sum and total of his bodily organization. What if my heart can not hold out much longer? I know that my mind shall live on. It shall manifest itself through the brain of the machine. Parsons is mistaken about this. He is a fool. If he understood, if he knew. . . . Oh, Genevieve! If I thought that were true I would kill. . . .

The writing stops here. But the question will not down. Did the

mind of Captain Rowan, as it was leaving its fleshly vehicle, glimpse his sister in the arms of Walter Parsons? Was it his intelligence that animated the chemical brain, put the ponderous mechanism into motion, drove it across the yard into the kitchen, and brutally killed the man he hated? The coroner and the jury may ignore the facts. They may recoil from them in horror. They may attribute what I say to hysteria, an unbalanced mind; but the uncanny truth remains. Walter Parsons was not accidentally killed: he was murdered by a man already dead, and the weapon with which he was slain was the metal man and the chemical brain of his own partial creation!

Folks Used to Believe



by ALVIN F. HARLOW

The Resurrecting Snake

ONE of the most remarkable snake stories in history was told for sober truth by European travelers returning from South America in the Sixteenth Century, and sincerely believed, even by some of the narrators themselves. The wonderful species of snake referred to, which seemed to partake of the characteristics of the phœnix, is described twice in the old chronicles of *Purchas his Pilgrimes.*

One account is given by Master Thomas Turner, who calls it "the Serpent Cobrus, whereof he saw one almost as big as himself, twentie foote long, killed by their Indian boy." He goes on to tell how the snake, when it seizes a hog or deer, "preyeth on the same, devouring all, till it be not able for fulnesse to stirre, but rotteth as it lyeth, the flesh quite away, the head and bones remaining, in which the life continuing, recovereth at last his former state. One was thus found in the rottennesse, and being bound for proofe with a withe to a tree by the Portugalls, on their return was found so repaired."

Another account is given in "A treatise of Brazill, written by a Portugall which had long lived there." "The Snake Cucurijuba," says he, "is the greatest or one of the greatest that are in Brazill, notable as well for greatenesse as for beautie. Some are taken of five and twentie or thirtie foote long, and a yard in compasse. It hath a chaine along the back of notable Pictures and verie faire, that beginneth at the head and endeth in the Taile. It hath Teeth like a Dogge, and laying hold on a man, Cow, Stagge or Hogge, winding it with certain turns of her Tail, it swalloweth the said thing whole. And after she hath it so in her belly, she lets her selfe rot and the Ravens and Crowes do eate her all, so that there remaineth nothing but the bones, and afterwards it breedeth new flesh againe, and reneweth as before it was. The reason whereof is (say the men of the Countrie) because while it putrifieth, it hath the head in the mire, and having life in the noddle, they live againe; and because this is knowne alreadie, when men find them putrified, they seeke out the head and kill it."

BIMINI

BY BASSETT MORGAN

"Give them the desire of the eyes, my maidens."

COMMANDER CRAYNE interrupted the tale by a gesture of his hand.

"Do you mind, Captain Ek, if I call Lieutenant Murphy in and have him take down what you are telling me? I'd like to check up on a few historical dates."

The old man nodded assent.

"It's what I want. Shows you're takin' int'rest. I've told some of this to several people. They think I'm crazy like you do, only they never got as far as takin' notes."

"Captain Ek, this is my aide, Lieutenant Murphy. He was with me on the polar flight. He is taking the brunt of this trip and I don't mind telling you that I'd rather take a dozen trips like our northern one than meet the crowds and dodge this publicity.—Murphy, Captain Ek is telling of a trip he made north. Please make a note of places he mentions and data."

Lieutenant Murphy was one of those Americans who "don't have to come from Ireland to be Irish." Stormy black lashes "set in with a smutty finger" hid twinkling blue

eyes as he looked at Captain Ek, whose white hair and silvery beard were close-trimmed, whose leathery brown skin showed fine wrinkles, and whose general appearance gave the impression of a man prematurely white.

Commander Crayne, whose name still occupied newspaper headlines recounting columns of his achievement in circling the North Pole and remaining in its vicinity long enough to make valuable discoveries which no other polar explorer had done, sat near the window. His face was in shadow and did not reveal the incredulity of his mind at the tale Captain Ek had been telling. He had first been impatient. So many visitors had called during his trip south, and since he arrived in San Francisco, that Murphy had instituted himself door dragon to keep them away. But even Murphy relented toward Captain Ek. The old seaman's bearing was kindly and commanding. Then, too, he had given Murphy a brief outline of a proposition for Commander Crayne to consider.

"I was sayin'," continued Captain Ek, "that we left Fort Chipewyan in the early spring, 1789, and to make a long story short, got to the Arctic Sea. I've gone over that trail again but I can't get the waterlane we found. I left MacKenzie. We'd had some words, and anyway he was crazier to reach the Pacific than to go north."

"Murphy, you've got that date, 1789," Commander Crayne interpolated. "Remember Chicago wasn't born then; I'm not sure, but I don't believe even Fort Dearborn was in existence on the site of Chicago. Seventeen-eighty-nine," he mused. "George the Third was reigning in England. Arkwright was making his spinning-jenny and Watts working on his steam engine. Burns was busy with his poems. Lord Byron was a baby. The French Revolution was at its height. America as a nation was about twelve years old. And Captain Ek says he was on his way north."

"It's jake with me," commented Murphy; "he made a bigger noise than that when I was listening first."

For an hour or more, Commander Crayne listened to the account of Captain Ek, fascinated by a story that was interlocked with data and detail, yet fantastic beyond belief. Then the old man took a checkbook from his pocket and unscrewed the cap of a fountain pen.

"You don't believe this, young man," he said, "and I don't blame you none. But they's a sayin' in this country that money talks! What I told you for was to get you to take a trip north on my account. I want to git back to that big bowl in the earth. I can pay for the job and maybe make it worth your while. What will it take for flying-machines that'll be able to stay there a couple or three months if necessary?"

"Offhand, I couldn't tell you, Captain Ek. But I've great faith in a machine the English are making, and with a few improvements of my own, I think she'd do. It would cost a good deal."

"You'll go, then?" asked the old man.

"Certainly, if it can be managed."

Captain Ek filled out a check, tore it loose and handed it to Crayne, who looked at it, then slowly smiled, and returned it.

"I'll put this in the bank," said the old man. "They'll let you know it's there for you to draw on. Now get busy, sir."

He rose and held out his hand, which Crayne grasped. He felt a spontaneous liking for Captain Ek, and a vast pity. There was no doubt the old fellow was mad, but his tale had held both young men deeply interested, and he had surprized them by his exact knowledge of polar conditions, his figures and dates, his nautical bearings and astronomical observations. Crayne, a stickler for

detail and with a prodigious memory, found no flaw. The romantic stuff he discounted. That Captain Ek claimed to have been a young man of twenty-one in 1789, and on his way north with MacKenzie via the Canadian northwest, he viewed as the wanderings of an aged man's mind.

He bade Captain Ek good-bye, and returned to sit on a corner of the table looking at Murphy.

"That check was drawn to my name, and for one and a half million dollars, on the First National Bank of San Francisco," Crayne said, then threw back his head and laughed. "For a bone-dry day, I have a dissipated feeling."

An hour later Commander Crayne was summoned to the telephone and heard a voice announce that the manager of the First National Bank was speaking. He informed Commander Crayne that Captain Christian Ek had placed one and a half million dollars to his credit, and the bank would honor drafts on sight, but requested three days' notice if the drafts were over thirty thousand cash.

Crayne's voice was husky as he thanked the manager and clicked the receiver on its hook.

"Bud," he said to Murphy, "it's true. Kick me, punch me, it'll be your last chance. Nobody is going to lay hands on me if I'm worth that much, after this minute."

"You gotta buy a plane, and get back here to enjoy it," said the unromantic Murphy. "How about sidesteppin' a lotta dinners and celebrations in your honor, and gettin' across after the plane? The sooner we find that bowl up north and the old man dips hisself in glory water, the sooner we come home and settle up. I owe a Post Street tailor for a pearl-gray suit."

Which was one reason the triumphal trip of Commander Crayne was suddenly canceled, and he and Lieutenant Murphy left for England, while Captain Ek's ship, a big auxiliary schooner, started her cruise through the Panama and via New York, where she received word from Crayne that he would be ready to proceed north in a fortnight.

SEVEN days later Crayne and Murphy watched Captain Ek's ship, the *Aurora*, dock, and went aboard her for the first time. It was not the build of the schooner, two hundred feet long by forty beam, her oak hull and double oak and pine planking, her thousand-horse-power engine, and canvas for her three masts, which interested Crayne so much as the charts and crude drawings spread on the cabin table. Over these he poured for a long time. Captain Ek had made many attempts to find the vast depression at the earth's northern tip where he said he had found the source of that beautiful and strange illumination known as the Aurora Borealis.

The two weeks stretched into three before the thousand-horse-power Birmingham airplane was stowed safely on the *Aurora*, and during that interval Murphy had gathered considerable gossip at clubs and gatherings, which he detailed to Crayne over a good-night cigar.

"Course, they smile at him some, but he's certainly got the dough and the oldest sea-captains along the docks admit that their grandfathers knew about him and his story. It's funny. He can't be real. They ain't nobody that old, and if they was, he couldn't be that spry. What's the name o' this here guy that went to Florida after a fountain of youth?"

"Ponce de Leon," supplied Crayne. "The island he searched for was said to lie in the Bahama group, and was called Bimini."

"Well, this Captain Methusaleh that we've hooked up with must have been readin' about this here Bimini and never woke up."

Dodging bergs and floes along the Labrador coast and into the ice of

Baffin Bay, Commander Crayne had leisure to read the notes made by Captain Ek—one page in his native Norwegian, the translation in quaint English on the opposite page—and again he marveled as observations taken on their trip corresponded. The *Aurora* was equipped with the latest inventions of science for "finding" ice.

A sonic depth-finder interested Murphy and a Swedish scientist, Bjornsen, deeply, but Crayne learned that Captain Ek had a weird instinct which acted more quickly than the instruments. He was standing with the captain in the bridge one moonlight night when suddenly Captain Ek jerked the engine-room telegraph and jammed the wheel hard over. A few moments later Murphy rushed up and stood at the rail staring over the sea. It was several minutes before the gigantic ghostly mass of ice appeared faintly luminous against the stars.

"Lucky you felt her chill," yelped Murphy. "We heard the engine telegraph before that berg made a sign on the jigger."

"I need no such contraptions," said the old man to Crayne.

"I've noticed that, sir," Crayne aswered, "but how do you get warning?"

"They tell me—the children of light."

Crayne was silent. Captain Ek had used that term in his story of the Sea of Light, beyond the magnetic pole. The cold air off the vast ice-cap of Greenland was crisp and electric. Crayne wondered if it affected the old man as the moon is said to affect animal life of the lower orders, and those whose wits are wandering. Even he began to feel the "wingedness" of his flesh in that electric-charged air of higt latitudes.

It was under the great hills of Meteorite Island that Crayne realized that Captain Ek's story had a considerable foundation of truth, for the ship was hailed by Eskimos on shore with undoubted welcome.

At Cape York, kayaks darted about the *Aurora* and shouts of "*Nalegak*" greeted them. They hailed Captain Ek as a great chieftain. Landing, the party was escorted enthusiastically to the village and a feast provided in a large communal igloo. The laughing, chattering Eskimos were instantly interested in Murphy, who had brought a banjo and regaled them with jazz, but, missing the Captain, Crayne went in search of him and found him on a gray point of rock in the starlight, his arms outstretched while he repeated in a sonorous voice Norwegian words, as of pleading and passion.

He turned casually to Crayne. "They know I am coming, my friend; the Children of Light are here. And She, who is keeper of my soul, awaits me yonder."

Again Crayne kept silence. He felt the electric tingling of his skin and hair under fox furs, as if soft fingers caressed him. There was no wind stirring; it was a night of calm silence, and the black sea and the ghostly bergs were all that eye could see. Yet Crayne saw the pulsing of the aurora take strange forms, like radiant creatures of dream fantasy with streaming gossamers of green and roseate light. They swung over the heavens and dimmed the stars, and swept closer to earth. They floated in a ring of splendor, as if dancing about a circle in the center of which he and the captain stood.

"A marvelous night," he murmured, his voice constricted and strange in his own ears. Captain Ek dropped a hand on Crayne's arm for silence, and immediately sounded music fragile as tinkling glass, or violin bows drawn over crystal goblets.

Again Captain Ek spoke in his sonorous voice, and it seemed to draw the sweeping, swirling creatures of light nearer, until the radiance was

so dazzling that Crayne closed his eyes. He heard a sigh that was almost a moan, and opening his eyes again, he found that he stood alone outside the radiance, which enveloped Captain Ek like a flame. Then it was gone, and the night was bafflingly dark after the splendor which had flown like a wind-driven cloud due north.

Captain Ek walked without a word to the igloo, followed by Crayne, who was shaken by that baptism of light and the fantastic optical delusion it produced.

For two weeks there was constant work, hunting and providing caches of food, stocking the *Aurora* with fresh meat, and selecting native crews and dogs in case of emergency. Then, with decks almost awash and fuzzy with dogs and fur-clad natives, the *Aurora* headed between the bergs of Smith Sound and made for Grant Land. Bitter cold fought them with fangs and claws. There were cutting winds, blinding drifts, and ice, but miraculously the *Aurora* plowed through until she lay at last on the north shore of Grant Land, and it was time to unload the Birmingham plane which Crayne and Murphy had been getting in order for quick lightering.

She was to carry Captain Ek, Crayne, Murphy, Bjornsen, two mechanics and a negro cook; and none except the commander and his aide knew the story told by Captain Ek. It was a new route to Crayne, and he had only the stars, the compass, and the captain's sketchy drawings to guide him. Yet, equipped with the last and best aids of science for protection and physical necessity, Crayne had no misgivings about the journey when they hopped off an ice-field with a comparatively smooth sweep and left the little *Aurora* and her crew, and the natives like motes on the vast frozen wilderness.

The Birmingham had a speed of four hundred miles an hour, with a hundred and ninety to make before she reached the magnetic pole. Head winds cut her speed amazingly, yet in the gray twilight that breathes between morning and evening stars, they crossed that dot of no man's land which is the magnetic north.

In the protected cabin cockpit of the Birmingham, with ear-tubes connecting them, Crayne called to Captain Ek and pointed below. But the old man's eyes gazed beyond.

"See!" he cried. "The Bowl! The Bowl!"

Far off against the stars, light shone. It was like the reflection of a fire, the glow from a volcano crater. And as if disturbed by some upheaval from earth's center, streamers of light puffed out and were blown in that gorgeous display that men call the northern lights. They pulsed over the bowl of night sky, and blew toward the Birmingham. Crayne felt his hair lifting his fur hood and his skin tingling as gossamers streamed toward the plane and circled it. Glancing at Murphy, he saw the boy's face weirdly illumined, and his eyes staring.

"If you see what I see, you're crazy," shouted Murphy, but although his lips were drawn from his strong white teeth, Murphy was not smiling. Commander Crayne was uneasy. It was enough that he saw those woman forms shaping from the mist, but when Murphy, matter-of-fact, hard-boiled youngster, saw them, Crayne could only marvel and control as best he might the flighty feeling of fear clutching him.

It was then that one of the mechanics reported water leaking from a cracked cylinder, and with a feeling of relief that he had an excuse other than his own apprehension, Crayne signaled to Murphy that they would land if possible to find fairly smooth grounding.

Murphy managed a smile instead of his grimace of tightly drawn lips, and the plane began to circle lower

as Crayne made out a comparatively level stretch of frozen sea, but they were still traveling at top speed, and the wind that had harassed them was gone.

The Bowl of Light came nearer, uncomfortably nearer, a vast sea of pale flame which bubbled to the black rims of the depression and spurted what appeared to be like colored steam of many hues.

Crayne felt that he dared not attempt to fly over it with a leaking cylinder. Yet as Captain Ek realized they were lowering, he leaned near Crayne and bellowed in a voice of rage, the first sign of temper he had shown in a voyage trying to the best-natured:

"Go on! Why do you halt now? See, they wait to welcome us, the Children of Light!"

Crayne howled the information about the cylinder, adding that he would later circle the Bowl, and finishing sternly: "I am commander, Captain Ek. Please remember."

The Birmingham circled lower until within five hundred yards, and Crayne saw that what appeared to be smooth ice was a crumpled, humped expanse, yet there was nothing to do but land cautiously. He nursed the big machine as best he could, felt her wheels bump, then heard an ominous crack, and she tilted and slid with one wing-tip touching. The propeller whirred more slowly, and stopped.

Murphy was out of the enclosed cockpit cabin immediately.

"Cracked axle as well," he shouted. "But that ain't what's got my goat. Look at them lights! Do I see 'em, or am I just plain nuts?"

Captain Ek showed the muscular grace and strength of a boy as he dropped from the open cabin door, then ran over the snow.

"Children of the Light," he howled back at them, his arm pointing to the heavens. "Now do you believe the story I told you back there in San Francisco?"

"Not much children," growled Murphy. "Flappers maybe, but nifty. Bathing-girl choruses ain't got a thing on them babies. And if you see 'em, then I ain't loco, Capt'n."

Crayne stared from beside the plane. Bjornsen joined him, and the negro came toward them lifting his fur-clad feet high and treading carefully as if he feared to startle the lowering radiance that swung about the sky and trailed light in wheels and whorls over the ice, and were indubitably shaping to the figures of women, nude except for their gossamers of pulsing hues.

Nearer, closer they came. Crayne saw rosy arms stretch out to join hands, and their fairy feet tripped over the frozen hummocks which glittered under the luminance like jewels. There was sound like ice tinkling in glass, rising to bell chime, and wind of unearthly sweet voices. It took sequence and rhythm and became song. And such song! It chilled and warmed. It was ice and fire contending, whipping blood to flame, pulsing over flesh through their furs, bathing them in exquisite rapturousness. It was as if stars danced and clashed together, the music of the spheres. Under that poignant and sensuous flood of light and sound, they stood dumb. Even the voluble Murphy was silent, and Crayne saw in his eyes the reflection of that light and on his face a weird unearthly expression.

He reached out to touch Murphy's arm, then clutched it. The boy did not move, seemed unaware of his touch.

Spellbound, they gazed, until rapture became painful, the heart-searing ache that is bred of unutterable beauty in those rare moments when flesh seems to drop away and the spirit free itself.

IT WAS Captain Ek who broke the spell, to Crayne's infinite relief. With outstretched arms he ran toward the dancing circle, which parted and

drew aside, and down silver luminance like a moon pathway from the flames of the Bowl walked a Titania of the North!

She seemed fashioned of ice tinted like human flesh, yet transparent. Her long fair hair swayed as on a gentle wind and swirled to her bare pink feet. Glittering light draped her from shoulder to ankle, blazing one moment like fabric sewn with diamonds, gleaming like fire the next. A smile of searing sweetness moved her lips, and a glitter like fallen stars scattered where she moved.

They saw Captain Ek run forward to meet her, saw his uplifted arms and realized that he stood at her feet and his great height reached scarcely above her arched instep. They saw her head bend and a marvelous smile change her face; then she swept one arm and covered him with her glittering mantle, and the song of the dancers rose like a vast wind between the worlds, then gradually grew softer until it was again the chime of bells, the tinkle of ice. As it diminished, the radiant figure merged into the fringes of the pulsing *Aurora,* and was swept away.

They stood mute and motionless. Crayne heard the negro's teeth chattering like castanets, felt the piercing cold, and motioned him toward the cabin.

Not a word was spoken as the men followed Mose. Crayne waited for Captain Ek, who had turned and came slowly, laboriously, toward the plane. He put out a hand to catch the old man, who was swaying on his feet. But he was amazed at the bitter cry that came:

"You have seen them. You have seen Her, who has waited for me this century or more. Now, for the love of your God, will you go forward? Grant me that one mercy, that I can bathe in the cold fire of that Light which vitalizes this puny earth, and join my Mate."

Crayne did not answer then. He got the old man into the cabin, and found the others still silent, except Murphy, who in low tones was hurrying the efforts of the badly shaken cook to serve hot soup and coffee.

Captain Ek lay on a narrow couch with closed eyes until Crayne touched him and proffered a steaming cup.

"Come, sir, you're cold as we all are. Drink this."

The old man opened eyes misted with dreams, stared about him, then shook his great body, and, reaching for the cup, swallowed it at a draft.

"How long," he cried, "how long will it be?"

"A day, Captain Ek," said Crayne quietly. "But I don't want to promise the impossible. I am as anxious as you to approach nearer that crater."

"You will fly over it. You will see the source of all life on this earth. You will land beside it where I can walk to the Bridge and bathe once more in the flame of life and death. Don't quibble now, Crayne. I have paid for this; paid as never man paid before. You will, if you have the guts, go back with such wealth that you can buy this earth. There in that Bowl is the stuff men call radium. I'm not asking you to believe that. You wouldn't believe. You didn't believe when I told you of the Bowl and the Children of Light. Now that you've seen them, I'll tell it all. These others have seen. They shall hear!

"I was born one hundred and sixty years ago," said the old man, "sea-born, on my father's fishing-boat in the North Sea.

"He had run away with my mother, the daughter of a wealthy thane, without time for a marriage ceremony; and because of her love for him she accepted his belief in the old gods of the Northland, Odin, Thor, and the reward of Valhalla. I was sixteen when we were wrecked off the north shores of Newfoundland when our vessel struck a berg in a fog. I saw the Valkyries carry the souls of my par-

ents to that heaven of our belief. I heard the voice of my mother call down the wind, 'Go north.' I had seldom touched foot on shore, had never found a sweetheart, and in my great loneliness when a little French smack found and took me, half frozen, ashore, I had one purpose in life—to find the mother who had been the only loving sweetness I had known.

"No matter how I had happened to fall in with explorers. Much of it I have forgotten. But it was with MacKenzie I made the first trip to the Arctic Sea through the Canadas."

Here Crayne interrupted the old man to say, "I have made inquiries and find Captain Ek's story of MacKenzie's outfitting at Fort Chipewyan is true. He started from there in 1789 for the Arctic. Here, also, Franklin outfitted for his two land journeys in 1820 and 1825. The name of Christian Ek is recorded on all three expeditions. Go on, Captain Ek."

"There was a girl at that wilderness fort, a young thing with fair hair, sweet as the wild flowers, straight and strong as a young pine, always laughing until we were leaving. Then I missed her and could not say farewell."

A shaking hand brushed across the old man's eyes as if to clear the mists, and he continued: "I found her among the members of our company, dressed in buckskins, like a boy, taking her share of the work, suffering the hardships, with never a complaint nor shirking a task. It was not until we reached the booming breakers of the Arctic Sea that any but me learned there was a woman with us. Then the beast that lives in all men broke forth. Not crueller is this North than human brutes. She, who had taken her place as courageously as they, was hunted, and I alone stood between her and the wolf pack to which they had changed. That fight was of one against many, of knives and fists, and I went down, but not before she was free, and I had seen the wraith of my mother flying under the stars, seen that dear Shade lift my sweetheart, and fly with her north.

"You will say it was a dream of the cold. But I say I saw the Valkyries, heard their cry, the ringing of steel in that music of the Shades. And as they swept away they beckoned me.

"Of that journey over the frozen North, the ice, the storms, the whirling snow, I have only the memory of their voices singing. You have heard that song which I followed. Sometimes they swept about me in Light, warmed my chilled heart, strengthened my limbs. And I came at last to the Bowl, bridged with the Rainbow Arch, and I believed it was Valhalla. There they danced, as you have seen them dance, and I saw the face of my Woman who awaited me on that Bridge of Light. I had started across when the voice of her who was my mother called me back. Instantly the air was filled with cries, urging me forward, and She who was so new a Shade stood with downcast eyes and would not draw me by their lovelight when my Mother called me back.

"Who hesitates on the Arch of Valhalla is doomed. I had known only two loves—mother-love and love for a mate that was as yet new and strange and maddening, that birth of love that is yet of the flesh and not winged with spirit. And in that struggle between Her who had given me physical birth and Her who nurtured the soul of me, I went down.

"I turned back to where my Mother shade waited, turned again to the sweet Shade on the Arch. My faltering feet fumbled. The fear of the flesh caught me, and I fell, not into the white flame that would have wafted me to those Shades of Valhalla, but into the lesser Light which cleanses flesh of vulnerability but does not transmute it to Spirit. And the Shade that was my Mother drew me to the rim of the Bowl, wrapped

me in her arms, carried me over the ice-fields and left me lying on a sun-warmed valley far down the coast.

"Waking from sleep, I found friends in the Eskimos; and the Bowl and Bridge, the Shades of Mother and Mate, were like a dream. But in the southland to which I came in time, I learned the truth of that baptism of Light. I could not die. Years passed. One gift they had given me, for when I wakened my hand clutched a great lump of some substance that held strange gleams and power to revitalize flesh after exhaustion. I carried it with me as a symbol of that dream of mine. It never left my side, and when I had reached the three-score mark and it seemed as if death could not be far removed, I journeyed to my Mother's home in Norway. Life was kind to me. Prosperity smiled always, and yet I was lonely, and had come home. I who had never known a home save the little ship on the ocean waves, had sought my Mother's home to die.

"I was able to buy the old house and land. And there in a valley protected from the bitter winds by tall cliffs, I placed the stone I had brought from the Bowl of Light, as a monument for her I had lost, and for myself, when my time should come.

"But death had no gift for me, no power to free me from flesh. My hair, white from that hour near Valhalla, was the only sign of age. I reached a hundred years, the loneliest man on earth. Men I knew were dead. Their sons were old men, and still I lived, trying to fill the days, cursed with a Midas gift, for everything to which my hand turned brought gold.

"It was then I sought death, wooed it as I had never wooed the Maid, and found that I could not die. There, in my log, you will find the newspaper clippings of times when death killed better men and passed me by.

"Meanwhile, seeking it, I went to the valley in bitter winter cold stripped to an undergarment, and lay with my head on the snow that covered the fragment of the Bowl. Instead of the frozen corpse that morning should have found, I was like a youth, and I had dreamed of my Mother and Her. Their voices told me to carry the stone far away and with it enrich man—a strange message and one I was many years interpreting. But I did buy a ship and set sail, and followed the path of the setting sun. Gales that wrecked that ship and drowned my crew, tossed me to land, and always I wakened to start forth again with that dream of dear Shades urging me to make use of the fragment of the Bowl.

"But the night of the North goes on and I must make this story end. You would be as weary of an account of a century and a half of one man's life as I should be in telling it. It is enough to say that in time my stubborn brain did fathom that command, and when I met a scientist of my own land, I asked him to accompany me to my home. It lies on a fiord of the north coast of Norway, a bleak place, cold even in the brief summer, but my valley was like the southland. Orange trees I had planted, scented the sea-wind; flowers grew as they do in Italy. The country people looked on me as a man of evil and the valley as accursed."

As the old man halted and sighed, Bjornsen the scientist cleared his throat and spoke: "I found the valley as Captain Ek has stated, and found the reason. It was underlain with that substance which is described by the word pitchblende, and rich in radium."

Captain Ek nodded.

"Wealth? I had more than a man could need; then the valley yielded its treasure, vaster than South African diamond mines. That fragment of the Bowl of Light had worked ceaselessly. I was richer than Aladdin, and lonelier than hell. No whimpering naked

soul yammering at the gates of the damned was so alone. If I made friends, I outlived them, and for me there was no earthly love. Then evil came. I wanted to die, tried to die. Poison affected me not at all, for I tried it. I endured the agony and lived. And in dreams the Shades warned me I must not die a coward. Yet I tried. A train in front of which I threw myself was derailed and passengers injured when they put on brakes. A speeding automobile before which I stepped was smashed, and I was uninjured.

"I had tried to reach the Bowl, not once but many times; but in vain. Then came the chance with Commander Crayne. The rest you know. And now, my friends, the Bowl is near and I have tried to expiate my sin of cowardice. The hour is near when I shall again set feet on the Rainbow Arch and know if I have attained to the merit required of those warrior souls who reach Valhalla."

He ceased to speak and lay back on the couch. There was a long silence in which the deep breathing of the others was the only audible sound. It was broken by Murphy.

"Pitchblende and radium." He looked at Professor Bjornsen. "No foolin'?" he whispered.

"The truth," said the professor, "so far as the valley is concerned."

"And you think he really did find a fountain of Youth?" asked Commander Crayne quietly, his eyes turning to the couch where Captain Ek lay apparently asleep, his bronzed skin fresh and youthful in spite of the deeply chiseled lines of life's nailed scrawl.

"If he's a hundred an' fifty, I ain't born," muttered Murphy. "Bimini, you said was the name of that place this here Ponce de Leon was after. Why didn't he come here instead of the West Indies?"

"You must remember, Murphy, that science has pretty well established the fact that the tropics, at one period of the earth's existence, covered the poles. Remains of mammoths and mastodons have frequently been found in polar regions, even preserved in the ice. But Ponce de Leon came too late for that. No doubt the vast majority of legends and fables had a foundation of fact, and were handed down from tribe to tribe by word of mouth before sign-writing was in its crudest beginning. I have taken time and trouble to corroborate the log, a diary which Captain Ek kept through the years. It is an invaluable account of the world's progress, and the books occupy shelves of one wall in his Norwegian home. He has graciously and generously willed them to me at his death. And I have faith enough in the truth of his strange story, that I have entailed them to my son and grandson, fearing that I shall not be alive to give them to the world."

"But pitchblende and radium!" said Murphy again. "If a guy broke off a chunk of that there Bimini Bowl stuff, he'd have a reg'lar diamond mine in his own back yard, huh?"

"Look here," the voice of Commander Crayne was stern. "I want no risks taken by any of this company. You are under orders to obey me implicitly on this cruise. I am not questioning Captain Ek's veracity, nor casting doubt upon his story, but I forbid any man to leave the vicinity of this plane, or the company of the rest of us for a single instant, until we again reach the *Aurora* at Grant's Land. Professor Bjornsen, you realize as I do, that Captain Ek must not be allowed to endanger his life up here. My orders were to bring him north. My own duty is to return this company sound and uninjured, and I propose to do that to the best of my ability."

The scientist nodded.

"Now boys," the commander's tone was lighter, "better get some sleep. We'll repair this plane, circle the Bowl if possible, then start south,

every man of us!" He emphasized his words by a thump of his fist on the tiny table.

A smile crossed the face of the sleeping patriarch toward whom their eyes had turned.

"Bimini," breathed Murphy. "An' radium. Boy, oh boy, with a chunk o' that, and a dip around the brim, a man could sit pretty!"

WRAPPED in fur parkas, they lay tightly packed in the small cabin of the Birmingham, yet it was not sleep which held them motionless through nine hours of repose. Crayne had scarcely closed his eyes than, like a fairy echo of that music of the Shades they had heard, came again the sound of song, poignantly sweet, so high-pitched that their nerves vibrated to music too acute for the eardrums to register. The aurora played between earth and the stars, but to Crayne there was the sensation of satin-smooth arms cradling his head, holding his body to the breast of some sweetness indescribable. And song coaxed him away. He could not translate those faint, fragile meanings of the music, but he understood. Nor could he shake off their unfolding caresses. Troubled by warnings of the flesh, he tried to free himself, in vain.

It was the negro who drew him back from an abyss, for a clutch on his arm and a powerful shake roused him when he had already opened the cabin door.

"Fo' Lord's sake, C'mander, shet dat do'. Whah you-all goin' in de col'?"

Crayne slumped back, heard the door click shut, and brushed his eyes with the rough fur sleeve of his coat. He blinked at Mose, whose eyes showed their rolling whites in the starlight shining through the thick glass plate of the port-holes. Then he looked about him. Captain Ek was still on the couch, Bjornsen and the mechanics were huddled together, but Murphy was missing.

"Mose, where's Bud?" cried Crayne, and the others stirred at his cry.

"He was gone when I woke up, C'mander. I was dreamin' dat de lights had me, an' dey was laughin' dey heads off an' dancin' around, when somethin' cold hit ma face; den de do' shet. I guess dat was when he went."

"Boys, wake up, Murphy's gone!" yelled Crayne. He was already wrapping himself securely in his furs and tying his hood. "We've got to get him. The boy's lost his head."

A quick glance showed Murphy's furs and gun-belt missing. Crayne did not wait for the others. He plunged from the cabin and was running over the snow, sure that they would follow, and as he ran he saw against that Light of the Bowl reflected like flame from a forest fire on the vast vault of sky, a small dark form.

Crayne called. The night was deathly still, the vast fringes of the aurora wavering thinly in gold and rose and emerald tints. His voice carried a long way, for he saw the running figure of Murphy throw up an arm as a sign he had heard, and plunge on.

Crayne followed, leaving the others far behind. He was aware of the increased radiance of the northern lights streaming from that crater of jagged upthrust brim which looked black on the snow. Running as he had never run before, he was past the first heart-breaking sob and gasp of breath and settling into firmer stride when he was aware of his body's warmth and realized that if he began to sweat it would mean frozen lungs, pneumonia and death. And the party were dependent on him for their return. Yet Murphy was close to the Light, a small black shape speeding, leaping, plunging on until it seemed

to Crayne he might at any moment plunge over the top and down.

Already the glow of that strange cauldron was blinding. Crayne snatched goggles from a pocket of his coat and put them over his eyes. The eyeballs burned as if with snow blindness. The air was alive with the sound of rushing flame, hissing, spitting, whistling noises, and behind, the faint cries of the men who followed were lost in that sound from the Bowl. Crayne saw Murphy's pace slacken and heaved a sigh of relief as it was momentarily lost in the darkness of the crater foot, then apparent again as the boy climbed upward until his head was above the serrated edge. There he waited, and in one mad dash Crayne reached the crater foot and began to climb.

"Murphy, you fool, come back!" he shouted, and as if his voice had called the Nymphs of Light from their abiding-place, the crimson steam from the Bowl shot to the stars and broke from a ruddy cloud into those woman forms that floated above, and they began their dance on the very brim of the crater.

Crayne reached Murphy's side, and clutched his arm. The boy's face was illumined by lurid light, his strong teeth flashing as he laughed joyously in the presence of that dreadful radiance.

"Maybe I'm dreamin'," he shouted "but I ain't the only one asleep. They come right in that cockpit, I tell you. Boy, oh boy! They had me outa that door before I knew it. An' now I'm here, I'm goin' over the top!"

"But, Bud, don't be a fool. They're not real. It's a trick of the eyes. It's electric-charged air and too much nonsense from Captain Ek."

"I don't care a damn what it is, an' women don't git my goat, but I'm goin' t' have a chunk o' wealth an' a swim in Bimini. An' nobody's goin' t' stop me now!"

Crayne clutched at Murphy, whose fists shot out, but the older, taller man swung his long arms from behind and pinioned Murphy's arms. Then began a struggle of desperation on the slope of the outer rim, and above danced the Children of Light, nearer and nearer, their song of joy changing to one of sorrow. Crayne was aware of Grief filling the world, aware that the curse of Babel was gone in that center of earth and that he understood their song of mourning over dissent among men.

As if the Light disclosed the workings of human minds to their eyes, the Nymphs sang of Love, pleading with these two humans to aspire to the spirit instead of lusting for wealth that would mock and betray.

Crayne realized a flash of shame as they read his own longing to possess such wealth, yet it was still controlled. His one desire was to save this boy from death, and Murphy was dragging him nearer and nearer that topmost brim. He realized the Children of Light kept at a distance. The visitation and wooing of the night was changed to aloofness as they darted to and fro, sweeping their gossamer drapes in maddening and dazzling glitter so close that it webbed the two struggling men like a gladiator's net, and in those veils they were helpless. Then came a rustling as of gigantic wings unfolding, and locked in each other's arms, powerless to move hand or foot, Crayne and Murphy stared at the swirling maelstrom of the Bowl and saw an arch curve upward, springing like a rainbow, and sweeping her gleaming robes about her came the royal figure they had seen on the silver path after their arrival.

A voice came, piercing and silver-clear. It touched understanding, and without words they knew their punishment decreed. It was as if She commanded, "Give them the desire of the eyes, my Maidens."

CRAYNE felt the scream in his own throat but heard no sound as the Bowl brim crumbled beneath his feet and he fell with Murphy into an abyss of such terrific Light that sight was gone. He felt the lave and spray and caress of Light, piercing, dissolving flesh. They sank as in the sea and came up on tongues of crimson flame washed over the Bowl brim, at which both clutched spasmodically, then lay still, clutched in their combined grip, to stare at that rainbow arch which still quivered and pulsed over the Bowl.

They knew the others had arrived. They heard the clear sound of bell chime, the song of the spheres. They saw Captain Ek at the Bowl brim fighting the grasp of Bjornsen and the two mechanics, but he shook off their detaining hands as if they were the fingers of children. Then the queenly figure smiled and winged above the arch, remained poised between earth and stars, and from that circle of dancing Nymphs came a young figure, golden-haired, warm-tinted, straight and strong, with her eyes downcast. And up the gleaming Arch toward her Captain Ek went. They saw that his face was suddenly young, his body slender, and he wore the look of youth.

There was one moment he stood clear against the glory, then her arms lifted, enfolded him, and the Arch was one arc of a wheel that revolved slowly as man and maid descended into the white central flame, and whirled faster and faster until human endurance broke before that vast and dreadful radiance.

Yet Crayne was not unconscious. He realized that the Light was gone except for the stars and soft aurora and that he was being carried over the hummocks and stretched on the couch of the Birmingham cabin. He was wakened in time by the sound of hammering as the mechanics repaired the broken wheel-axle and leaking cylinder. He felt Murphy sit on the side of the couch and clutch his wrist, and when he opened his eyes, Murphy was grinning.

"We got it," he said, "an' we got it good. Little lump o' rock it looks like. And we went for a swim in Bimini. Boy, oh boy, I'm only waitin' to try out that there youth-stuff back home! But"—his grin was sobered and his voice slightly hushed—"the old man got across. And Bjornsen's gone."

"Bjornsen?" cried Crayne, jerking upright.

"Yeah. Nobody thought of him goin'. The ol' captain shook 'im off like a terrier shakes a rat, an' went. An' the wheel began to turn, they said, an' Bjornsen ran out on one o' the spokes an' the dames caught him, an' he was gone. They's just the two mechs an' Mose, an' you an' me. An' the boat'll be ready in an hour or so. An' here's all we got to show for that dip into glory water."

Murphy rolled two objects that looked like fragments of black glass, flaked unevenly; and, touching them, Crayne felt a tingling as of a mild galvanic battery charge, which was not so much sensation to the fingers as of ceaselessly working energy of the mass.

"Mose decided they was black diamonds an' he's bin cuddlin' 'em considerable, an' it's a funny thing but his wool is white as ours and losin' its marcel kink."

"White—ours?" asked Crayne.

Murphy snatched a tiny shaving-mirror from the wall and thrust it into Crayne's hand; then pulled off his fur cap. The boy's young face was framed in snow-white curls. Crayne looked in the mirror and saw his own ruddy thatch was the color of ivory. His arms went out, his hand touched Murphy, and suddenly the boy had clutched him in a tight grasp of young arms.

"Maybe it's real, an' it's you an' me alone some day. We'd better keep on speakin' terms." He tried to

laugh, then suddenly dashed from the cabin.

IN THREE hours the Birmingham was repaired and tested, and they set to work smoothing a stretch of ice where she could race for the take-off. In the galley cubby, Mose was singing jazz, and between preparations for a meal, darting to the mirror to stare at his white, straight hair. An excited but silent company took their last look at the reflection of that vast and awful source of the world's atomic energy, the light of which men call the Aurora Borealis.

Then the flight began, and with it an eery moaning of winds that blow between the worlds. They stood at salute, faces toward the Bowl, a gesture of honor and farewell to Captain Ek and Bjornsen.

Then came the fight with gales that howled, drove frozen snow like flails in a constant tattoo on the wings and body of the Birmingham, until she was tossed like a bird. The weary mechanics slept. Crayne was at the throttle. Mose crouched in a heap with the fragments of rock in his arms, his teeth chattering as he saw the strain on the faces of Crayne and Murphy.

Suddenly Crayne cried out, and Murphy leaped to his side.

"The stick's gone," he yelled above the fury of elemental cataclysms about them.

The end came suddenly—a downward plunge, a crash, then flames leaping. Crayne was on his feet in a moment. The cabin of the Birmingham had burst like an eggshell, and from it rolled Mose still clutching the rock, and Murphy. Of the others—the two sleeping mechanics—they had not sight or sound. Flame soared and roared, the black smoke streaked through the storm, and what had been a steel-thewed bird of flight was a roaring inferno, the heat of which must have brought merciful death to the poor wretches stunned by the crash.

Glowing framework was all that was left of her in but a few minutes. Crayne, Mose and Murphy faced the bitter blast without food, fire or shelter.

It was Crayne who roused the other two from stupefaction.

"We can't be far from the ship. We die if we hesitate. Let's go,"

And buffeting the storm they went, three puny forms, without compass or star; went until Mose staggered from exhaustion and plunged on his face in the snow. Then without a word they lifted him, drew his arms over their shoulders and pressed on.

"Bud," said Crayne at the end of hours of torture, "it's true, I think. We were due to slip out when she crashed. We're due to go down now. Man can't live in this wind up here, and I'm not even tired. How about you?"

"Nope. Seems like it's right, boy. Bimini stuff, maybe. An' if that ain't a ship's mast-head light, I'm a liar. An' hear the dogs! We've come some distance, no rest, no grub, no anything. They was something in it. Bimini!"

Over the snow, dogs streaked with yelps and howls, and from a star of light hung low over the ice that had hemmed her in came men of the *Aurora* to meet them.

They had pulled the beard of death, seen visions, dreamed dreams. Yet when they met the men of their own race they were silent.

"COMMANDER CRAYNE, Lieutenant Murphy and Mose the negro cook were the only members of the Birmingham's crew to return from the ill-fated flight to the magnetic pole," was the news account flashed south by the *Aurora's* "sparks". "The plane crashed and burned. A particularly marvelous display of

northern lights was followed by the worst storm recorded in these latitudes, in which the plane crashed."

A later report told of the loss of the *Aurora* off the Grand Banks:

"The schooner *Aurora* is sunk, the last of a series of disasters of this ill-starred cruise. In spite of berg-finding apparatus and modern appliances, the *Aurora* struck a low-lying berg which opened her from stem to stern. Her crew saved themselves in boats that were picked up by fishermen. Commander Crayne, Lieutenant Murphy and the negro cook, Mose Johnson, were on the bridge when the boats pulled away from the doomed vessel, having refused to go in the boats although there was room. The government cruiser *Mohawk* was dispatched to the scene of the disaster in hope that the three men had somehow survived."

Later dispatches:

"After a miraculous escape, clinging for hours to a floating raft with bitterly cold seas washing over them, Commander Crayne, Lieutenant Murphy and Mose Johnson were picked up by the *Mohawk*, little the worse for their dreadful experiences. These three men of the Birmingham, lost near the magnetic pole, seemingly bear charmed lives. The only statement Commander Crayne made was that he wanted a month's quiet; then he would plan for another northern trip of discovery. The will of Captain Ek, lost in Crayne's flight, has left his vast fortune to charity with only two individual bequests. His books are willed to Professor Bjornsen, who perished with him, and they will revert to his son, also a professor of sciences in Christiania. The other bequest is that of his estate in Norway to Commander Crayne, where Crayne and Murphy will go immediately."

Reading the news accounts, Murphy crumpled the paper and looked at Crayne.

"Dare you to swim the Atlantic and try out that Bimini stuff!" he said.

"Bud," replied Crayne, "standing in the *Aurora's* wheelroom with locked doors when she slipped from the berg and sank in God alone knows how many fathoms, and us three coming up, catching a spar and living for two days and nights in berg-cold water, is proof enough for me. Bimini. Perhaps we have dipped in hell!"

OLD GHOSTS

By MAUD E. USCHOLD

Loudly the wind laments an ancient pain,
And stirs to flight old dreams like stars a-wing,
Until through shivered silence voices sing
Sun melodies and threnodies of rain.

And then all long-forgotten ghosts return,
Armed with the grievous talons of old wo,
To seek the blossoms scattered long ago
On graves to which their wandering footsteps yearn.

The ISLE of LOST SOULS

by · JOEL · MARTIN · NICHOLS, Jr.

"His one hoarse scream of terror echoed and re-echoed among the cliffs."

The Story Thus Far

RALPH HEARNE, riding in a New York subway in the year 2014, is recognized by Dr. Trask as the reincarnation of Boris Saranoff, who nearly a century before had helped bury the jewels of the imperial family of Russia in the sea at Bakelief Island, Alaska. Dr. Trask is himself the reincarnation of Gregory Birsk, an unscrupulous Russian soldier of fortune who had tried to obtain the jewels for himself and was slain in a duel; and Dr. Trask's lovely wife is the reincarnation of the Grand Duchess Tatiana, the murdered Tsar's daughter, who escaped when her family was slaughtered by the Bolsheviks at Ekaterinburg. Dr. Trask projects himself, his wife, Hearne, and Merwin (his assistant, who is the reincarnation of Metkanoff) back into the past in the Fourth Dimension, hoping that by their combined psychic power they can change the course of past events and discover the hiding-place of the Tsar's jewels. He plans to betray his wife and Hearne, leaving them stranded in the Fourth Dimension nearly a century in the past, while he and Merwin return to their bodies in 2014 A. D. and organize an expedition to Bakelief Island to recover the treasure for themselves. Projected backward into the year 1928, the four arrive at Bakelief Island on board the *Narcissus*, commanded by Karlak, a former admiral in the Tsar's navy.

5. A Plot to Escape

KARLAK flipped his partly smoked cigarette into the burbling stream at his feet, motioning Saranoff to do likewise. "Perhaps an unnecessary precaution," he said, pointing up toward the cliffs where a solitary figure paced slowly back and forth under the moon, "but one can never tell. I have a feeling that already Birsk suspects something. See, he has doubled the guard over the passage to the sea and there is always one of those blacklegs of his on the cliffs up there watching the basin. Should they see even so small a glow as this they might be inclined to investigate."

This story began in WEIRD TALES for December

"What are your plans?" asked Saranoff.

"I am satisfied that Birsk is not sincere in his desire for counter revolution," answered Karlak. "In fact I am sure of it. Once he has the jewels in his possession, we fear he will cut every honest throat on the island and be off. That is one reason why I have kept you from his sight. He does not know that we have another hand to help us. I am only hoping, too, that in some way you may get back your memory in order that we may know exactly what happened in that hut on the Markinoff road. But hist, I hear voices down there. I believe Brillitz and Hillis are coming."

Out of the thicket on the rocky terrace below them stepped two figures, bending low with the weight of some object carried between them.

"Heaven be praised!" growled Karlak. "They have found at least one of the chests. But there should be two. They have left the other behind for the time being, perhaps."

A few moments later the two had dragged their burden to the pine copse in which Saranoff and Karlak stood. "We were expecting you later and from the other direction," said Karlak. "We'll go down with you and get the other chest."

"There isn't any other," said Hillis, wiping his brow. "I found this one at 248 fathoms with the sides of Shepard's bell cracking under the strain. I could find nothing more. I worked the bell well over the whole floor of the basin but there was no other chest. They must have hidden the other somewhere else."

"How did you manage to bring it up without Birsk finding it out?" asked Karlak.

"I found a shelving ledge near the surface of the basin. It's about three feet under water at low tide. I left the chest there until Brillitz and I could go down and get it. We were not seen; of that I am sure, and yet I am equally certain that Birsk suspects me. When I came up today, empty-handed as before, he growled something about the length of time it was taking to find the chests and whether he couldn't do as good a job himself in going down."

"Once let him go down in it," murmured Karlak, clenching his fists, "and I'll see to it he never comes to the surface again. It is plain, though, that we can delay no longer. We are outnumbered ten to one, but if we strike quickly the surprize may make up the difference. And there's enough in the one chest to finance all our dearest hopes. There is another difficulty, however. That is the grand duchess. We may get the chest out of Bakclief without Birsk's discovering us until too late, but to get her out of that cabin on the cliff through the sentries he keeps there is quite another thing. We must make the attempt—no later than tomorrow night."

"There is no way out except through the passage," put in Brillitz. "And that is too well guarded. Over the cliffs is out of the question. So far as I can see, we're trapped."

"There's a second entrance," said Hillis. "I explored it from the bell only yesterday while they thought I was on the bottom. Do you see that promontory over there? It's just above the shelving ledge where I hid the chest. Well under it, with the mouth of it free of water at low tide, is a cavern. It's more of a tunnel than a cavern because it leads directly through the mountain to the outer side. This island is of volcanic formation, and the walls are honeycombed with holes of this sort, though I know no others which pierce it completely.

"Now my idea is this: if we throw some planks and other material over the cliff at the point where the cavern makes into the sea, we can doubtless find the material on the other side when we get through. To make a raft would be a simple matter; the sea is gentle at this season and we could

paddle to the next island, rest there for a time and then go on until we had reached a point where there is more chance of being picked up by some passing ship."

"It sounds reasonable," said Karlak. "It's a slim chance, but the only one that I can see now. I think we should proceed in this wise: I shall call to see Her Highness at the house on the cliff sometime tomorrow. If I see an opportunity I shall tell her of our plans and warn her to be ready at the ebb of tide, which is—which is——"

"About 2 o'clock in the morning," put in Hillis. "Start a little earlier, if possible, because if the tide is in too far on the other side we can't get out, and so we'd have to remain there inside the mountain for twelve hours."

"Good. Well, then I shall leave it to you and Brillitz to get the planking for the raft and supplies over the cliff sometime this very night. With the wind in the direction it is now, we should find them there tomorrow, ready to be used. Saranoff will come with me to the cabin on the cliff tomorrow night. No later than when the moon rests on the western cliffs we will be with you at the promontory. God be with you all! Should neither of us return, you will know that we, for our part, have failed. Do not wait for us longer."

It was with a tremendous feeling of relief that Ralph Hearne, in the body of Boris Saranoff, heard Karlak's words. During the past week, since their arrival on Bakelief Island, he had been looking forward eagerly to the meeting between Saranoff and the grand duchess, Tatiana, for he knew that then would come the crucial moment when he and Mrs. Trask, furnished with the pellets in the ring, could release their souls and return to their own world, leaving Merwin and Dr. Trask to whatever fate the situation might have in store for them. He had twice tried to reach Mrs. Trask by projecting himself out of the body of Saranoff, as he had done in order to speak with the Spirit Karlak on board the *Narcissus*, but each time the tremendous mental strain attending the attempt had forced him to relax once more into Saranoff's body without having reached her side. He had then consulted the Spirit Karlak, who reminded him that the physical distance between Saranoff and the grand duchess was so great that there was no hope of his (Hearne's) soul reaching that of Mrs. Trask before Saranoff and the grand duchess were in closer proximity to each other.

"Saranoff and the grand duchess will meet by the cabin on the cliff three nights from now," the Spirit Karlak had said, "and then you can do what you will. As it is now, neither your psychic power nor hers is sufficiently developed to permit your projecting yourselves from their bodies over such a distance. Saranoff will met her on the cliff; he will not recognize her; he is not yet to regain his memory, but that need not affect you. You have only to take the pellets and be off."

Hearne had been obliged to let it go at that, forgetting that there was one soul now on Bakelief Island whose psychic powers were developed far beyond his own.

6. The House on the Cliff

A GIBBOUS moon threw its pale light over the cliffs of Bakelief Island, dipping the wood-mantled hills in a shining pool of silver on the fringe of which the encircling crags stood out like gigantic gnomes motionless against the starry vaults above them. It was almost 2 o'clock in the morning, and the camp, save for the Russian sentries pacing their airy platforms, had long since steeped itself in slumber.

On the cliff to the south, partly buried in a bower of stunted pines,

stood a small cabin known to those on Bakelief Island simply as the "House on the Cliff". Few on the island ever went there, and then only if they had plausible errand; for Gregory Birsk knew the heat of the smoldering fires that burned in the blood of his band and was not yet ready for the kindling of them. There lived there the only women on Bakelief Island; one old and haggard, the other young and beautiful and sad.

On this night two figures crouched in the deep shadows of the adjacent pine thicket. They had been there since the first coming of darkness, and now the younger of the two twitched with ill-concealed impatience.

"Easily, my friend," whispered Karlak. "The time is now arrived. Mark well the place where the two sentries lounge before the door. Yonder is Birsk's hut, but he prefers the cabin of the *Narcissus* for the present, and so we need fear only his keen eyes from her decks down there in the basin. Now we will creep around the cabin from here, then cross the cliffs and drop upon those fellows near the door. There must be no more than two blows—yours and mine—and no cries. These two must not move again."

Tense with the suspense of the moment, Saranoff, at Karlak's side, wriggled gingerly out from his shelter. Slowly the two crept up the slope toward the east wall of the cabin. Another ten feet and they lay low, listening with bated breath, but to their ears came only the soughing of the night wind among the pines and the drowsy conversation of the guards near the door. Then Saranoff's groping hand loosened a stone; it rattled ominously down the slope, seeming to awaken a thousand echoes in the stillness of the night. With thumping hearts they lay prone on the slopes. Would they be seen?

One of the sentries, with a sleepy oath, got up and peered down the hill toward the basin. Nothing. Satisfied, he turned back to his place, and they heard him complaining to his companion of the useless vigil imposed upon them by their chief.

Karlak and Saranoff were moving again, rounding the cabin, foot by foot. Now at the rear they heard far below them the restless beat of the Pacific. They came presently to the western corner and then began worming their way down the short slope. One more corner and another dozen yards of this snake's crawling and they would be on the flat-topped boulder against which their quarry lounged in desultory conversation.

Where they had crept by yards before, now they crawled by inches. A single false move—the rattle of a pebble, or the crunch of knees against gravel—and all would end. They were flat on the rock now, clearly outlined against its silvered surface by the pallid orb in the heavens above. Karlak was groaning inwardly. Had there ever been so clear a night before? Another foot now. Even breathing must cease!

The two sentries talked on.

Two heavy pistol butts fell as one. Two figures leaning against the flat-topped boulder staggered, stumbled, and sank slowly earthward. Two heavy carbines clattered down against the rock. No other sound—not even a groan!

Karlak waited but a moment. The falling rifles of the senseless guards had awakened no one. He approached the hut. There sounded three soft, double raps on the door. It opened—the fraction of an inch.

"All is well, Marta. Is Her Highness ready?"

The old woman at the door nodded and moved aside. Behind her now, stepping forward until she stood full in the doorway, was a young woman, lovely even in her male clothing. She paused on the threshold.

"I can not leave you thus, Marta," she exclaimed, choking back a sob.

"But Your Highness must *go*; it is for the best."

"They will kill you, Marta."

"I am an old woman. What matters it whether it come today or tomorrow? But you must hurry. See, already the moon rests on the upper cliffs. You risk your own life and theirs if you remain longer."

They embraced. "I will surely come back for you, Marta. God will protect you."

She stepped out full in the moonlight.

Ralph Hearne had been awaiting this supreme moment when he should come face to face with Mrs. Trask. During these last few days since the arrival of the *Narcissus* in the basin of Bakelief, he had allowed himself to be absorbed more and more into the body of Boris Saranoff; so that finally, though he did not feel the need of sleep, he had whiled away the hours sleeping when Saranoff slept, eating when Saranoff ate and in general lending himself to the bodily functions of the Russian, to a point where he almost feared that his own soul had disappeared altogether.

But now, when Tatiana Romanoff stepped into the full of the moonlight, he knew the supreme hour had come, and so he thrust himself loose from Saranoff's body, calling out, "Mrs. Trask! Mrs. Trask!" And then her soul stood before him, projected in the body of the Russian princess, though it was the soul of Gloria Trask which looked out of those eyes.

He saw her hand go to her throat, and she swayed a little like a sapling in the wind. "My God!" she whispered finally; "you came back to my husband that day! I told you not to. I warned you, and now—but why did you come?"

"I came gladly," he murmured, "for I wanted to see you again. And now all is well because my soul is in Saranoff's body and Saranoff has the ring with the green pellets which will release us and bring us back to our own world. See, I have the ring here."

He held up his hand. The ring was gone!

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "The ring! I've lost it! Or somebody has taken it! What has happened? Karlak, Karlak," he cried, and in that instant the Spirit Karlak appeared at his side.

"It is quite as I feared," said the Spirit Karlak. "I would have warned you had I any way of knowing beforehand what you earthling souls are going to do. But what he was to do was concealed from me. It is Trask who now has the ring."

"Trask! But I can see it on Saranoff's true body."

"Ah yes, but I explained that to you. Trask could take *your* ring but not the ring on Saranoff's true body. You sleep too soundly there with Saranoff. I could have warned you when the scheme appeared in Trask's mind, but I am powerless to speak with you unless you will it first. He came and stole it in the night."

"But how could Trask come to me over that distance if I could not go to Mrs. Trask until Saranoff and the grand duchess had brought us closer to each other?"

"Because of his superior psychic power, my friend. He has developed it far beyond the average mortal. It is also his superior knowledge of the space laws of the universe which gives him an advantage over you. You are lost unless something develops which I can not yet foresee. The hour of Saranoff's doom approaches."

"When is he to die?" demanded Hearne.

"The day after tomorrow. You have forty-eight hours of what you call time. Act quickly when you can. And remember that when you earthling souls are all together your psychic power is pooled ready to the hand of him who uses it first. Your one chance now lies in the fact that ere long all of you earthlings are to be

together. It is ordained that certain events shall happen at that time, but with your pooled psychic power you may be able to swing them out and substitute events of your own making. But remember also, it is a dangerous business. The cosmic tendency is to throw the events back into line as it is ordained they shall be. Preserve Saranoff's life as long as you can, for therein lies your only hope."

Saranoff and the grand duchess were by this time well down the hill. The increasing distance between himself and Saranoff began to tell on Hearne, and he knew that Mrs. Trask must be suffering in like manner as the grand duchess drew away from her, so he bade farewell to the Spirit Karlak and suggested to Mrs. Trask that they relax into the bodies of the Russians.

Once more in union with Saranoff, Hearne looked into the Russian's mind and realized that he had not yet regained his memory.

"How long, oh Lord, how long?" Hearne found himself murmuring.

7. The Sea

THE *Narcissus* lay below them, every spar, every ring, every boltrope clearly etched by the moon on the placid water of the basin. A turn here from the path brought them to a thicket on the edge of the promontory, and here they met Brillitz and Hillis.

"You are late," whispered Hillis. "The tide is already rising. We'll have to be quick about it. Brillitz and I have everything ready. The chest lies below, ready to be carried through the cavern to the other side."

"Good," said Karlak. "Let us be off."

They tied a rope fast to one of the trees and then let themselves down, one by one, to the surface of the water. There they found foothold on a narrow ledge beneath the surface. The tide had already risen to a point where they found themselves submerged to their waists. All was dense blackness here, shielded as it was from the moon. Pressing forward with Hillis in the lead they found themselves in a narrow, low-roofed cavern, the floor of which slanted gently upward. Hillis produced a flashlight, and by its aid they struggled forward, Brillitz and Saranoff bringing up the rear with the chest between them. Karlak was aiding the grand duchess.

Now and then Hillis paused to flash the light overhead on some jutting rock which threatened their passage, but after a time they were able to walk upright and their speed increased. Now again they were forced to crouch, and once Hillis paused to turn the light on the basalt roof of the cavern.

"The water from the Pacific comes in as far as here," he said. "See how the erosion is eating into the walls." He touched a huge block of basalt with his hand, and it moved perceptibly, so that he took his hand away in haste. "We're lucky to have made this trip no later than we do," he continued. "That ledge is about ready to fall. Once it comes down the tunnel may be blocked."

They were on a gentle down grade once more. Presently Saranoff's nostrils, until now filled only with the dank odor of damp earth, sensed a breath of salt-tanged air. Hillis bade them pause, and they heard far ahead the restless moan of the Pacific.

"The tide's well up in the outer cavern already," he exclaimed. "Let's hurry."

Ralph Hearne, in Saranoff's body, was viewing the apparent success of the attempted escape with great alarm. If the fugitives got away, bearing his own and Gloria Trask's souls with them, then the soul-saving green pellets in the ring would be lost to him forever. He knew that Saranoff and the grand duchess were to die with the coming of another day, but if they were to die at consider-

able distance from Birsk (and hence Trask) it meant that Hearne would never get another chance at the ring which Trask had stolen from him—the only ring which was available to him in his own dimension. It meant, furthermore, that there would be no opportunity for a pooling of the psychic power of the four earthling souls, and without this pooling of the psychic power there would be no suspending of the space laws and hence no altering of events as fate had ordained them.

He would have carried this thought to a logical and perhaps more comforting conclusion, but at that moment a full salty breath swept in upon Saranoff's face, and Hillis, in the lead, plunged to his ankles in sea-water. They were nearing the mouth of the cavern. It widened here so that they were able to hurry forward without fear of jutting rocks. Now they rounded a sudden turn, and the Pacific, pale silver from a waning moon, lay before them rising in gentle swells that broke against the reefs at the base of the island.

The gray of coming dawn was already upon them before they had gathered together the planking and the supplies which Hillis and Brillitz had dropped over the cliffs the night before. Brillitz then transferred his rifle to the grand duchess on the completed raft, and then they dragged the crazy craft out as far as the reefs offered foothold. Springing upon it here, they began pushing with crudely fashioned paddles. Luckily there was only a gentle ground swell, and so as soon as they found they were clear of the breakers they were able to push forward at a fair rate of speed.

"I wish it were foggy as it usually is here," grumbled Karlak an hour later. "We couldn't have picked a worse day so far as the visibility is concerned. If one of that gang should happen to get up earlier than usual and climb the cliffs for a look at the sea—St. Michael!" His voice dropped with a half-muttered oath of consternation.

"St. Michael!" he growled again. "Our trip is to be of short duration, after all. We forgot the *Narcissus'* launch—and here they come!"

With muttered exclamations of dismay they turned and looked back toward the island.

At that moment, poking her burnished nose out of Bakelief passage, with a curl of white water already under her prow, was the swift tender of the *Narcissus!*

It was the hare and tortoise once more. In less than half an hour they heard the whining purr of the first bullet high above their heads, plainly intended as a warning to halt.

"Who is the best shot?" asked Karlak. "You, Brillitz. Take the rifle and see if you can pick off the man at the tiller. Steady now, while he gets his aim."

Brillitz fired on the upward swell when the raft was steadiest. Looking back they saw the man at the wheel of the launch throw up his hands and lurch backward. For a moment the pursuing craft shifted wildly in its course, but soon there was another guiding hand on her tiller.

"Good. Now another, Brillitz."

But there was an answering report from the launch, and Brillitz, spinning sidewise, staggered once and then lurched into the sea. He carried their only weapon with him.

"Keep on paddling," ordered Karlak. "Poor Brillitz!—right between the eyes."

Paddling was a hopeless task and presently they gave it up altogether. In fifteen minutes the launch was alongside.

8. *Captured*

ON BEING brought back to the island, Saranoff and Hillis were imprisoned in separate log huts while Karlak and the grand duchess were brought up to face Birsk alone.

Ralph Hearne, in Saranoff's body, had not been sorry when the fugitives were captured. It meant that two possibilities were now open to him. Either he might find opportunity to get his own ring back from Trask, or in the presence of the pooled psychic power when the four earthling souls came nearer to each other he might take advantage of the suspension of the laws of space, reach across the dimension which separated him from the ring on Saranoff's true body and seize it.

Scarcely had this last possibility entered his mind, however, when all opportunity for such action was lost. Several of Birsk's men, under Metkanoff's command, came into the hut, roughly searched Saranoff, and after emptying his pockets of the trifles there, took the ring away from him. Before they left the hut Hearne heard Metkanoff say that all this material was to be turned over to Birsk. Hearne realized in the bitterness of despair that Trask now had control of the ring in both dimensions—his own and Birsk's. And so in utter exhaustion he relaxed once more into the being of Boris Saranoff.

When Karlak came in, Saranoff could see that something strange was afoot. The old man was trembling visibly as he drew the young Russian into a corner where the guard outside the door could not hear.

"It is their love of a fight," Karlak exclaimed. "Some who have seen you now recognize Saranoff and they want to see the finish of that business on the Markinoff road. Birsk was for executing all of us, but Metkanoff had already put the idea into their heads that a fight was a possibility. The duel has been their one diversion here for years. They are like great children in that, but they are strong men in other things. Birsk dares not deny them this pleasure. He has not seen you, either, and Metkanoff keeps it from him who you are, fearing, I suppose, that Birsk will not dare the duel. Now Birsk in the old days was the best saber in the imperial armies, but even he admitted you had given him a terrific fight in that hut along the Markinoff road."

Hearne, who had been listening intently to this conversation between Karlak and Saranoff, felt himself suddenly torn loose from Saranoff's body. Astounded for the moment, since he had never found his spirit projected before without first willing it himself, he did not at first comprehend what had happened, but presently, when the throbbing ether had settled once more, he saw a burly figure standing before him—a figure, heavily bearded, dressed in coarse, dark clothing with leather boots almost to the knees. He knew from descriptions it must be Gregory Birsk, and for a moment he did not grasp the significance of the visit, but a second later he realized that this was the counterpart of Birsk's body. It was not Birsk's soul which looked at him out of those eyes. It was Dr. Trask! Karlak and Saranoff talked on, oblivious of any other beings in that room.

Dr. Trask's eyes were smiling in their usual grim, sardonic way. "I've come to bid you farewell," said he, "and wish you a pleasant sojourn in what will soon be an island of the dead."

"You blackguard!" exclaimed Hearne. "What had I ever done to you that you should have played this vile trick upon me?"

Trask shrugged his shoulders. "We are enemies throughout every dimension of space—throughout all the ages," he replied. "In this 'vile trick,' as you call it, I shall be very cheaply rid of you. But further than that, I needed you in finding out the whereabouts of the Russian crown jewels. That knowledge will shortly be mine. After that I shall merely swallow one of the green pellets which you were so kindly keeping in that ring for me—and pouf!—I shall re-

turn to our own world—my own world, because it will be yours no longer. And my wife, on whom I am aware you already have—er—designs—she will go back there with me. I have further use for her."

"There are but two pellets in the ring," said Hearne. "You can leave me here, but one of you three must stay also. If you take Mrs. Trask, what of Merwin?"

"Merwin? I have no intention of taking him back, my friend. I leave him to you—a choice companion for your wanderings. I trust you will enjoy his company better than I have done."

Hearne was thinking rapidly. Would it not be possible for him to kill Trask now? And take the ring? He remembered the Spirit Karlak had told him that those who had been projected back into the Fourth Dimension, as he had been, were subject to the same space laws. Hence, while he could not have molested Birsk, or Karlak or any of the rest of them, Trask was none the less within reach of his hand.

Thinking thus, he poised for a rush at his enemy, but just as he hurled himself forward there came a wild ringing laughter and Trask disappeared! In his escape, Trask had merely to relax, finding himself once more back in Birsk's true body. Hearne, remembering that, and having less psychic power, was unable to follow.

He realized all this with a sinking of the heart, but a moment later there came to him the thought that, after all, Mrs. Trask would escape the terrible fate that seemed to be so irrevocably in store for him. Trask had said he should take her back to their own world, and so if that were true Hearne's worst fears would not be realized. And yet, on the other hand, could her mental torture be any less when she came to realize that her soul was bound to Trask throughout time? Would she not prefer to be back there with him, Hearne, a soul to wander as his must wander—a soul to be lost as his would be lost? To these questions he could give no answer.

Relaxing back into Saranoff's body he found the Russian in the midst of a conversation with Karlak concerning the chest which had been brought back with them when they were captured on the raft.

"Birsk opened it," Karlak was saying. "He has been trying to keep it from them, but the news has spread about among the men. That chest was full of scrap iron—bolts and nuts and the like. Somebody has fooled us all! I see, now, why there were two chests. It is doubtless the other which contains the treasure. Those who were charged with hiding the jewels probably hid the other chest somewhere about the island within easy reach when they should come for it. The first was sunk in the basin as a decoy to discourage any who might find out about it and try to raise it. I understand, now, why they let this chest go to such a depth when they must have known we would have the devil's own job raising it."

"And so the stealing of the *Narcissus* was quite unnecessary," said Saranoff. "What a foolish thing to sink the worthless chest in the basin!"

"No, on the contrary, the wisdom of it is already proved. Had they not done so, Birsk would by now be in sole possession of the jewels."

"Yes, yes, that is so," said Saranoff.

Karlak got up. "It is not good policy for me to keep you awake any longer," said he. "You must rest in order that you may have the strength to kill Birsk tomorrow. The one thing I fear is that with the loss of your memory went also your skill with the saber. If so, it will be mere slaughter."

"Who knows but that I may regain it then? If I lost it in fighting him, may it not be that I will regain

it when I find myself fighting him again? Is not that the way those things happen?"

"That is a thought which hadn't occurred to me. We can only hope for the best." Karlak pulled a flask out of his pocket and passed it over to Saranoff, together with a small package. "Here is food and drink," said he. "Touch nothing the guards have brought you. I trust no one here. Birsk would not hesitate to poison you if he discovered you were Saranoff. What a shock it will be for him tomorrow when he sees you! Perhaps the surprize will put him at a disadvantage. One would hope he might be afraid of you, thinking he was fighting a ghost. But that can not be. Birsk fears neither man nor devil. I must go now. Sleep well."

9. *The Duel on the Cliff*

SARANOFF had slept soundly through the night, but Hearne had been impatient for the dawn. When it came at last there were hurried footsteps outside the door, and, a moment later, Karlak, pale and haggard, entered.

"I have something to tell you," he whispered to Saranoff. "I have a plan—Hillis already knows about it." He bent closer and whispered in Saranoff's ear, "If, by chance, you should kill Birsk and we all act quickly, we may yet save ourselves. If you kill him, his band will turn on us in the flash of an eye as soon as they realize what has happened. But between the killing and their realization of it there may be a moment when we can act. They are most certain to be off their guard then. But it is most important that we act as with a single mind. The grand duchess, on my prompting, has expressed a desire to see the fight, and she will be there with her woman, Marta, on the southeast corner of the flat-topped rock where the duel will be fought. Hillis and I shall be near by but they will probably be watching us very carefully. Do you, Saranoff, take care to make him fight near the outer side—on the edge if you can. Should you kill him—and God grant you may!—hesitate not so much as an instant, but run toward us at the southeast corner. There, in looking over the precipice, you will see about ten feet below you a jutting ledge of rock. Drop to it instantly, and in a few seconds, with God's help, Hillis and I will break from our guard, knock down those nearest Her Highness, hurry her to the edge of the cliff and help her down to you. It must be done quickly, and yet with infinite care, for a single misstep means that you go over the cliff into the Pacific, two hundred feet below. It is one chance in a thousand, but facing death as we do, we can not afford to ignore it.

"This ledge, on which you will find yourself, runs eastward for about twenty feet. At that point there is a fissure in the cliff through which we can make our way down into the valley and so to the basin. By the time they have scattered to head us off we shall be at the edge of the basin. There we can take the tender and make our way to the yacht. Birsk has had that machine-gun of theirs mounted on her, and with it we may hold them off indefinitely. In time we might attempt the passage. But now the guard is outside waiting; no more until we reach the cliff."

Hillis joined them outside, and so with their guards walking ahead and behind them they marched around to the northern and more barren side of the island, where the sheer gray walls stood out in a straight precipice over the Pacific. As they climbed to this rocky eminence they saw that all the denizens of Bakelief Island were there before them. To one side, standing on the flat-topped rock which constituted the dueling-ground, was the grand duchess, her dark hair stream-

ing freely in the wind. Beside her stood her woman companion, Marta. Birsk was already there.

Karlak turned to Saranoff and with Hillis' aid helped him with his coat; afterward, at Saranoff's direction, stripping him down to his waist. Over on the other side of the rock they were doing the same for Birsk. Presently the two duellists stood facing the distant horizon, their skins whipped by the chill winds of dawn.

Metkanoff presented the sabers for their choosing, first to Birsk's second and then to Karlak. The grizzled old Russian ran his finger along the edge of the steel and then struck the pommel smartly across the heel of his boot. There should be no loosened blade to undo them at the crucial moment. He handed the weapon to Saranoff with a murmured, "God be with you!" and then shook him by the hand, at the same time whispering in his ear, "All is prepared."

The soul of Ralph Hearne realized in that instant that the crucial moment had arrived. This was undoubtedly the point for which Dr. Trask had been waiting. The four earthling souls were all together now in close proximity—Trask's, Gloria Trask's, Merwin's and his own. The psychic power accruing to each was pooled; it but awaited the hand of him who would use it first. The events which fate had written down to be enacted might now be changed. Trask had undoubtedly laid his plans for the changing of them, but how, God only knew. No, if it were something already completed Hearne knew that he might summon the Spirit Karlak, and the Spirit Karlak would tell him at least what Trask planned to do even if the Spirit Karlak had no way of foretelling what success would attend Trask's plans.

But if he, Hearne, knew that, would he be any better off? Fate had written that Saranoff should regain his memory and slay Birsk in the duel which was now to begin. One thing was certain—Trask had planned to reverse this event by aid of the pooled psychic power. Trask would see to it that Birsk killed Saranoff. What should Hearne do? What could he do? A dozen ideas, fears, conjectures, flashed through his mind. Just how was Trask most likely to go about this changing of events? Obviously it would be taking too much of a chance to try to increase Birsk's fighting-skill to the point where Birsk could overcome Saranoff. No, it must be some other way. Ah yes, Merwin! Hearne had forgotten Merwin. Metkanoff was over there with a pistol at his belt and Merwin's soul was in Metkanoff's body. That pistol at Metkanoff's belt would be available to Merwin. But Merwin couldn't shoot Saranoff; he could only shoot Hearne and shooting Hearne wouldn't affect Saranoff. But, on the other hand, couldn't Merwin shoot Saranoff now? Of course he could; the pooled psychic power again! Fate was loosened; the laws of the universe were in its presence, ready to be held in abeyance. Therefore it was very likely that Merwin could shoot across the dimension and kill Saranoff—or at any rate disable him to the point where Birsk would kill him.

HEARNE, coming out of his revery, realized with a sudden shock that Saranoff was already in the midst of a terrific struggle. The two combatants had faced each other and Birsk had gasped at the first sight of the man before him, the man he thought he had killed in that little hut on the Markinoff road. For a moment he had faltered, and in that moment Saranoff had nearly killed him, so he had now thrown conjecture to the winds and entered into the battle of his life. Whatever were the other faults of Gregory Birsk, cowardice was not one of them. Treachery for him had been a tool wherewith to work on life; he had never thought of it as a shield and buckler against death. Sara-

noff's first onslaught had now ceased and Birsk's heavy saber swooped up into a savage cross cut which Saranoff turned away with a quick forward thrust and a twist of his body. But Saranoff had been a trifle too slow. There was a smothered scream from the grand duchess. Birsk's blade had bitten deep into his side. Saranoff was down—God!—but no, he was up again! It was only a flesh wound.

That blow did something to Boris Saranoff. Until now he had fought with a certain lethargy; this was to him a duel, a contest of skill in which life, to be sure, was the reward of victory. But he had not cared much about life, and the man who leaped before him meant nothing more than any other man who might have been there as well. Nor did the girl mean anything to him—the girl who stood behind him and screamed when he fell.

But that blow, the sting of pain, the gush of blood—something seemed to snap in his brain and all grew gray before him. He was fighting—fighting through a veil of thick grayness in which faces swirled and danced about him. Sometimes there were but two faces—the man with the saber opposite him and a girl standing high above him and holding a candle. Now the candle was gone and the sun was there. But it was always the same face—the man and the girl. The candle—she was holding the candle. No, she was holding the sun. The sun! Of course, the sun! And then with a rush the veil was snatched away and the vista of his past was laid before him. Ah, it came to him now—that fight in the hut on the Markinoff road. The man before him—Gregory Birsk! The girl!

He shouted her name like a battle cry and hurled himself forward against his enemy. The blade in his hand now became a livid, hissing breath of flame. Up and down it whirled—in and out it weaved—whistling slash and cut and clashing parry! A live thing it seemed, darting tongues of flame at the man who recoiled and backed and stumbled away before it. None of the old cunning was lost; he was Boris Saranoff again. In his mind now was only one desire, one intent, one purpose—to slay the grinning monster before him! Another drive—yes, his own blade was crimson now with the blood of Gregory Birsk, his mortal enemy!

"Good," muttered Karlak. "He will carve his name on the breast of that beast ere long. Birsk, your hour of reckoning has come again. Back—back—not too far, Saranoff, lest he push you in among his henchmen. Ah, Birsk, he has put the sun in your eyes once again. You back the other way? No, you can not go farther! That is not the path to victory! St. Michael, Birsk is a child in Saranoff's hands. Once let Saranoff corner him—and all is over!"

The muttered exclamations with which the crowd had watched the struggle had ceased, and there resounded now only the clash of steel on steel and the hoarse breathing of the fighters. The possibility that they might lose their chief had not yet occurred to the Russians, absorbed as they were in the tense excitement of the conflict. Birsk was now purely on the defensive. His sole hope was to evade the lightninglike slashes of the man before him.

It was at this point, well rehearsed between Trask and Merwin, that Merwin was to do his part. Hearne, in Saranoff's body, watching for what he knew must be the crucial moment, saw Merwin project himself out of Metkanoff's body; saw him walk to one side, pistol in hand; saw him raise the pistol; heard the crash of the report. This was the moment!

Saranoff whirled suddenly, his free hand going to his sword arm. He staggered and the point of his saber wavered and sank. Birsk, seizing the

opportunity, whirled his own saber upward. Came the resounding clash of steel on steel. There was a ringing clatter as Saranoff's saber lay on the rock at his feet.

Trask had succeeded!

A shout arose from the crowd. Birsk whirled his weapon high above his head once more, the broad blade cutting a vivid ribbon of light under the yellow rays of the sun. Saranoff, disarmed, awaited the blow, his free hand still clasping his wounded shoulder. "This is the end," thought Hearne.

The grand duchess screamed. Birsk whirled his blade still higher and higher and stepped back for a better blow. But that foot, coming down, found no solid rock beneath it, for this was the edge of the cliff and the Pacific yawned below. Birsk, clutching at empty air, vanished over the side, his one hoarse scream of terror echoing and re-echoing among the cliffs, rooting each of them with horror to the spot.

Two hundred feet with the black points of jagged reefs waiting in assured silence for their prey!

The eery fate that befell Hearne and Mrs. Trask in the bodies of Boris Saranoff and the Grand Duchess Tatiana will be told in next month's chapters, which will bring this story to its end.

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10. The Red Specter

There was a red, raw dripping thing that mowed
  And tottered in a spreading pool of blood;
  There was a shape, on which a scarlet flood
Enwrapped it in a steaming blood-red shroud;
There was a sound, gigantically loud,
  That seemed to pour from where the horror stood;
  There was a crackle as of blazing wood,
And all the air was misty as a cloud.

And both my hands were covered with that red,
  And everything was red and strange and mad;
    I scarce could know the evil that I did;
The air from some vast stellar carnage bled
  And veiled the shrieking shape in haze that had
    Red phantoms in its bleeding mystery hid.

An Unusual Ghost-Tale Is

THE GHOST OF MAD LAVEEN

By ROBERT WATSON

PERHAPS you have never heard of Mad Laveen, who lived for years at the head of the gulch there and passed out last year. It is true that he didn't cut much of a figure when alive, but his final going out was spectacular.

Laveen was apparently a Russian: big, bearded and taciturn. No one in Kalamalka Valley knew just where he came from. He simply arrived one day, took up his abode in the old shack that sat on the top of Ghost Ravine, and remained there for years, speaking to none, interesting himself in nobody, doing little or nothing outside of squeezing enough from the hills and the river to feed and clothe him, and that was not difficult.

Once a month he would drop down to the settlement of Zore with an order, neatly written and in good English, for flour, tea, sugar and other plain necessaries. He never passed the time of day even with old Hank Jacques the storekeeper. He would place his order on the counter, stand aside, pick up his bill when Hank made it out, pay over the money, push his purchases into a sack, sling the sack on his back and trudge out along the back lanes into the bush and home.

The mothers of the kiddies playing in the roadway used to call their offspring indoors when they heard Mad Laveen was in the village. And the children needed no second warning, for the name had become a synonym of bad, evil, devil; although why this should be no one seemed to know, for Laveen kept his own counsel and so far as common knowledge went had harmed no one directly. But the very dogs pulled in their tails and cowered away at the sight of him. Something sinister seemed to invade the atmosphere at his approach. The settlers in and about Zore always took the high trail when passing Laveen's at the gulch, for they were afraid of him.

Once Sam Lethe's boy, Roddy, had ventured down the low trail to the door of the shack. Laveen was not at home. Roddy admitted that, for he had seen him in the distance canoeing down the river. But Roddy had to hop home on one good leg that day, for a bullet had splintered the other, although Roddy swore he neither heard a shot nor could he admit that he had been hit from the direction in which Laveen had been.

One day, in the dead of winter, when it was twenty-five degrees below zero, Widow Fernie, in a kindly act of charity, had ventured to within a hundred yards of Laveen's place, on the trail, and had laid a pot of warm soup, with a chicken in it, right in his way, and just shortly before the time she thought Laveen would be arriving home. At midnight, that same night, she was awakened by a crash of splintering glass and, on jumping out of bed, found that her pot, with the soup and fowl frozen and untouched, had

been crashed through her bedroom window.

It was little wonder that the folks called him Mad Laveen, and less wonder still that no one cared to have anything to do with him any more than he appeared to care for having anything to do with them.

If Laveen insisted on being alone and living alone, that was his business, and so long as he harmed no one, with no definite proof against him, there was nothing to do but to let him live his own life.

But the less that is known of a person, the more is likely to be conjectured of his past history.

A stranger came into the village one day and mentioned that he had watched Laveen bathing himself by the river's edge. That statement alone created astonishment, for Laveen and water appeared to be as opposite in friendliness as the poles. But the stranger said Laveen was bathing an open sore on his great back, which was criss-crossed from neck to waist in a latticework pattern of great, raised, blood-red weals. Then it got about that Laveen was a Russian refugee, possibly escaped from the horrors of the Siberian mines, and that the dreaded knout and Laveen had been on familiar terms on many occasions, so much so that the poison had eaten into him and had kept his wounds open.

That he was devoutly religious in his own way was also common talk.

Daring lads had come back from bush excursions in the ravine with the tale that Laveen had a crucifix set up in a lonely place in the forest. On the top of the crucifix was the head of a mitered priest or saint. One boy, more venturesome than the others, had examined this closely when Laveen was absent. He said the head was made of wood, beautifully carved and ingrained with a delicate, humanlike coloring, showing the face of a suffering Christ, with sad eyes that seemed to bear the burden of the sins of the world in them.

The lad in his bravado had intended tearing down the thing and bringing it into the village as a trophy, but the sad eyes of the image had sent him home with the sacrilege undone.

But enough of the living Laveen. Sufficient is it that he lived out his hermit existence and shunned his fellow men.

I WAS deputy sheriff of the district at this time, and in the forestry service as well. My jurisdiction took me over a large territory, and I had been absent from the little settlement of Zore for possibly three months, when I returned to set up a camp of a dozen men on some clearing that required to be done for observation work. I had no sooner got to town than I was assailed on every side with the same query, "Did you come across Mad Laveen on your travels?"

"No," I answered. "What's the bother? You folks seem suddenly to have developed a great interest in him."

"Well, he hasn't been seen for more than two months," old Hank Jacques ventured. "We ain't worryin', nor we ain't carin', only it's darned kind o' queer."

"Hasn't anyone gone to his place to find out?" I asked. "The man might be sick and not able to get around. He might even be dead."

"We ain't been to see, an' nobody's got a mind to take any chances on a charge o' buckshot for bein' over-friendly."

It was a cold-blooded way of talking of the case, but, after all, I could not blame the settlers. Laveen had brought this attitude of theirs on himself.

That night in camp I woke up several times, and as I looked down over the Kalamalka Valley, with the moon shining silverlike on the river away over beyond Ghost Ravine, I

could not help thinking of this poor devil of a foreigner and of the possibility of his being in a plight that might need a helping hand.

At breakfast next morning I mentioned it to some of the boys. I asked them if they were game to come along to investigate, and I had no trouble over volunteers. Late in the afternoon we took cautiously down the trail. As we neared the clearing by the shack, I got the boys to remain in hiding with their guns ready in case of trouble. I went quietly forward, alone.

The door of the shack was closed. There was a shutter on the only window. I battered on the door, but got no answer. Thinking it most probable that Laveen had flown the country, I beckoned the boys forward. We put our shoulders to the woodwork and the door gave way.

A rush of air of the vilest odor swept on us. We stepped back for a bit until we thought it was safe for us to venture in. It was dark. One of the boys tore down the shutter from the window, letting the sunlight stream in. Laveen's bunk was empty. An object was lying on the floor. It was Mad Laveen, sprawled face downward. We turned him over. He had evidently been dead for weeks. A neat little bullet-hole showed on his left temple. By his side lay an empty rifle.

Laveen claimed credit for at least one good deed. He had left the world that he seemed merely to have encumbered.

As we looked about for the cause of the musty, pestiferous odor that pervaded the place, a strange sight presented itself. Around the walls of the shack were nailed the heads of putrefied fish and dead animals, rabbits' feet and birds' wings, all in the most horrible state of decay. They must have been there for ages. Below each were written religious quotations intermingled with vile blasphemies, and all in good English.

In a hurry to get away, I ordered the men to pack Laveen's body outside, when my attention was drawn to a sheet of notepaper on the bench near the window. I picked this up and read it:

"The curse of God be on you if you bury me in the earth. Build a fire, saturate me with coal-oil and set me on top. Leave neither hide nor hair of Laveen."

"Poof!" I remarked to the boys. "He's quite finicky about the disposition of his remains. He didn't do much good when he was alive; darned if we're going to do any Hindoo stuff over him. Come on! Let's dig a hole for him at the end of the clearing. That should be plenty good enough."

And that is exactly what we did—a four-feet-deep hole and "Good-bye, old sport!" for his funeral service, a nice little mound with a few white stones on top, and we were through.

As the only way to get rid of the pest-house he had left behind him, I decided to burn it.

We set it alight, then stood back to watch it go up, for, after all, he is a queer codger, man or boy, who doesn't like to watch a fire.

In the gathering dark, that shack went up like pitch and dynamite. It roared and seethed and hissed, with the flames hitting the roof of the sky till we had to back up to save our hair and eyelashes. The walls continued to stand up around what seemed to be a white-hot furnace.

It was an awesome sight, away out there in the clearing, backed by the dense forest, we standing by the river's edge and every one of us staring, half-hypnotized, with not a word to bandy between us.

But suddenly Andy Slaven, my foreman, cried out hoarsely, "Great God! See—there's Mad Laveen!"

Every one of us stiffened as if an electric shock had shot through us. Instinctively we looked in the direction Andy had indicated. And there, apparently as alive as any of us, was

Laveen—big, broad, bearded and grim—striding down from the place where we had buried him.

Not one of us could speak. A queer chill, that froze us where we stood, crept down our spines. I could feel the hair rise at the nape of my neck, and my tongue curl, dry, at the back of my mouth. If Laveen had had a mind to, he could have killed every man-jack of us where we stood and we wouldn't have been able to raise a hand to save ourselves.

On came the big Russian, striding calmly toward the blazing shack, paying no heed to us at all. He came round the side of the house and made for the doorway. At the entrance he turned. His eyes opened wide and seemed to flash with exultation. Then he grinned at us in a good natured way, showing his great white teeth. He raised his hand in a motion of farewell, tumbled backward and disappeared in the blaze.

The moment he did so, the fire shot to the sky as if the very fiends of hell were at play inside. Then, as we stood gaping, the walls fell inward with a crash and a shower of sparks, and gradually the flames subsided until nothing was left but smoldering ashes and black char.

We were a silent crowd that traveled back to camp that night, and it was not until next morning that the boys opened up.

"Hallucination!" "Hypnotism!" Most of them agreed on that. Yet every man there had seen the same thing.

"All right, boys," I said at last, "let's go down and dig him up; then we'll be sure. No use leaving this thing unsettled in our minds for all time."

And down we went with picks and shovels.

LAVEEN'S grave was slick and neat, just as we had left it the evening before. Even the little heap of stones that Andy had set on top was still sitting pretty.

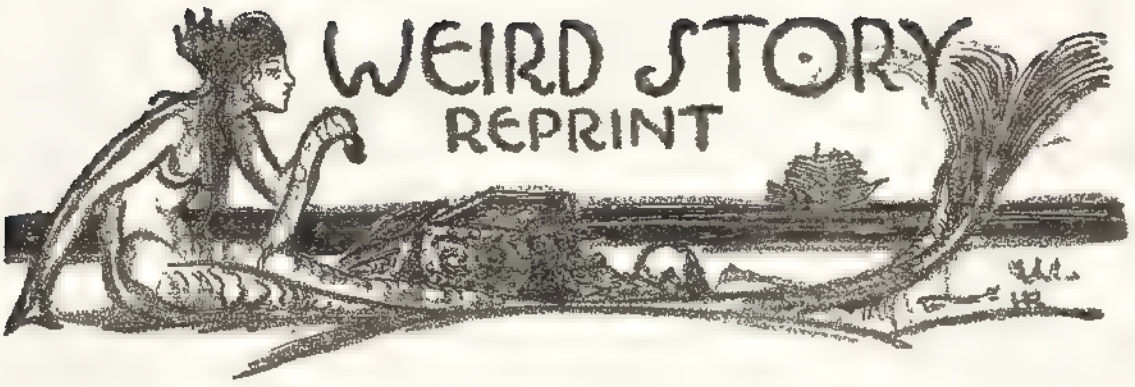
As I told you, we had buried Laveen four feet deep. Well—we dug and shoveled for ten feet deep and in a ten-feet square, right on the spot where we had laid him, but devil a hide or hair did we find of Mad Laveen.

Let Night Have Sway

By LEAVENWORTH MACNAB

Sigh on, sad sea, thy sobbing sootheth me;
Wail on, wild wind, along thy winding way;
Fade, fade, ye flaming floodgates, in the sea—
Let night have sway.

Life is a lonely labyrinth, and the light
Mocketh my misery, and glam'rous day
Smileth deriding on my shadowed sight—
Let night have sway.



*When the Green Star Waned**

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

RON TI is our greatest scientist. Which is to say that he is the greatest in our known universe, for we of the planet Venhez lead all the others in every attainment and accomplishment, our civilization being the oldest and most advanced.

He had called a meeting of seven of us in his "workshop," as he termed his experimental laboratory. There came Hul Jok, the gigantic Commander of the Forces of Planetary Defense; Mor Ag, who knew all there was to know about the types, languages and customs of the dwellers on every one of the major planets; Vir Dax, who could well-nigh bring the dead to life with his strange remedies, powders, and decoctions; Toj Qul, the soft-spoken, keen of brain—the one Venhezian who could "talk a bird off a bough," as the saying goes—our Chief Diplomat of Interplanetary Affairs; and Lan Apo, whose gift was peculiar, in that he could unerringly tell, when listening to anyone, be that one Venhezian, Markhurian, or from far Ooranos—planet of the unexpected—Lan Apo could, I repeat, tell whether that one spoke pure truth or plain falsehood. Nay, he could even read the truth held back, while seemingly listening attentively to the lie put forward! A valuable man—but uncomfortable to have about, at times!

Lastly, there was myself, whose sole distinction, and a very poor one, is that I am a maker of records, a writer of the deeds of others. Yet even such as I have names, and I am called Hak Iri.

Ron was excited. That was plain to be seen in the indifferent, casual manner he displayed. He is like that. The rest of us were frankly curious, all but that confounded Lan Apo. He wore a faintly superior smile, as who should say: "No mystery here, to me!" I love that boy like a brother, but there are times when I ardently desire to bite him!

Ron stood before a huge dial. Now this is not a record of his invention, but a statement of the strange adventure in which we seven figured because of the events called to our attention by means of that wonderful device, so I shall not attempt its full description, merely saying that it was dial-formed, with the symbols of the major planets graven on its rim at regular intervals, and from its center there swung a long pointer, just then resting at a blank space.

"Listen," commanded Ron, and swung the pointer to the symbol of our own world.

* From WEIRD TALES, April, 1925.

Instantly there broke forth in that quiet room all the sounds of diversified life with which we Venhezians are familiar. All six of us who listened nodded comprehension. Already our science knew the principle, for we had long had dials that surpassed this one, apparently; for ours, while but attuned to our planet alone, could, and did, record every event, sight, or sound thereon, at any distance, regardless of solid obstacles intervening. But this dial—it bore the symbols of all the inhabited worlds. Could it——?

Ron swung the indicator to the symbol of Markhuri, and the high-pitched uproar that immediately assailed our ears was characteristic of that world of excitable, volatile-natured, yet kindly people.

Planet after planet, near and far, we contacted thus, regardless of space, until Ron swung the pointer to the symbol of Aerth.

And silence was the result!

RON'S look spoke volumes. We looked into each other's faces, and read reflected therein the same anxiety, the same apprehension which we each experienced.

That something was radically wrong with our neighbor, everybody already knew, for many years before the green light of Aerth had become perceptibly dimmer. Little attention, however, had been paid at first, for, by interplanetary law, each planet's dwellers remained at home, unless their presence was requested elsewhere. A wise idea, if one stops to consider. And no call had come to us nor to any other world from Aerth; so we had put it down to some purely natural cause with which, doubtless, the Aerthons were perfectly capable of coping without outside help or interference.

But year by year the green light waned in the night skies until finally it vanished utterly.

That might have been due to atmospheric changes, perhaps. Life, even, might have become extinct upon Aerth, so that no one lived to hold communication with anyone on any of the other inhabited worlds of the Planetary Chain, but it was hardly likely, unless the catastrophe were instantaneous; and in that case it would needs be violent. Anything so stupendous as that would have been registered at once by instruments all over the universe.

But now—this invention of Ron Ti's placed a remarkably serious aspect upon the question. For, if Aerth still occupied its own place—and we knew beyond doubt that it did—then what lay behind this double veil of silence and invisibility?

What terrible menace threatened the universe? For whatever had happened on one planet might well occur on another. And if Aerth should perchance be wrecked, the delicate balance of the universe would be seriously shaken, might even be thrown out completely, and Markhuri, so near the sun, go tumbling into blazing ruin. Then horror upon horror, until chaos and old night once more held sway, and the unguessed purposes of the Great Mind would be——

Oh, but such thoughts led to madness! What to do? That course alone held fast to sanity.

"Well?" demanded Hul Jok, the practical. "What are you going to do about it, Ron?"

That was Hul Jok all over! He was Ron's best friend and ardent admirer. He knew Ron's scientific ability, and firmly believed, should Venhez crack open, that inside of an hour Ron Ti would have the crevice closed tight and re-welded until inspection would fail to find any traces of the fracture! But at that, all Venhez thought the same way about Ron Ti's abilities, so Hul Jok was, after all, no better than the rest.

"It is matter for the Supreme Council," replied Ron gravely. "I propose that we seven obtain permis-

sion to visit Aerth in one of the great Aethir-Torps, bearing credentials from the council explaining why we have trespassed, and, if it be possible, try to ascertain if this be a thing warranting interference or no."

Why record the obvious? When such as Ron Ti and Hul Jok make request to the Supreme Council, it is from necessity, not for amusement.

The council saw it in that aspect, and granted them free hand. We started as promptly as might be.

THE great Aethir-Torp hurtled through space in smooth, even flight, Hul Jok in command. And who better fitted? Was he not our war prince, familiar with every device known for purposes of offense and defense? Surely he whose skilled brain could direct whole fleets and armies was the logical one to handle our single craft, guide her, steer her, and, if need arose, fight her!

With this in mind I asked him casually yet curiously:

"Hul Jok, if the Aerthons resent our inquiry, and bid us begone, what will you do?"

"Run!" grinned the giant, good-humoredly.

"You will not fight, should we be attacked?"

"Hum!" he grunted. "That will be different! No race on any planet may boast that they have attacked an Aethir-Torp of Venhez with impunity. At least," he added, decisively, "not while Hul Jok bears the emblem of the Looped Cross on his breast!"

"And if it be pestilence?" I persisted.

"Vir Dax would know more about that than I," he returned, shortly.

"And if——" I recommenced; but the giant released one hand from the controls, and clamped his great thick fingers on my shoulder, nearly crushing it.

"If," he growled, "you do not cease chattering when I am on duty, I shall most assuredly pitch you out through the opening of this conning-tower into space, and there you may start on an orbit of your own as a cunning little planet! Are you answered?"

I was. But I grinned at him, for I knew our giant; and he returned the grin. But he was quite right. After all, speculations are the attempts of fools to forestall the future. Better to wait, and see reality.

And as for surmises, no one could possibly have dreamed any such nightmare state of affairs as we found upon our arrival.

A faint, dull, but lurid reddish glow first apprised us that we were drawing near our destination. It was Aerth's atmosphere, truly enough, but thick, murky, almost viscous, like a damp, soggy smoke.

So dense it was, in fact, that it became necessary to slow down the speed of our Aethir-Torp, lest the intense friction set up by our passage should melt the well-nigh infusible plates of Berulion metal of which our Aethir-Torp was built. And the closer we drew to Aerth's surface, the slower were we obliged to proceed from the same cause.

But finally we were gliding along slowly, close to the actual surface; and, oh, the picture of desolation which met our eyes! It happened that we had our first view where once had stood a great city. Had stood, I say, for now it was but tumbled heaps of ruins, save that here and there still loomed the shape of a huge building; but these, even, were in the last stages of dilapidation, ready to fall apart at any moment.

In fact, one such did collapse with a dull, crashing roar, merely from the vibrations set up by the passing of our Aethir-Torp—and we were a good half-mile distant when it fell!

In vain we sounded our discordant *houtar;* no sign of life could we discern, and we all were straining our

eyes in hopes. It was but a dead city. Was all Aerth thus?

Leaving behind this relic of a great past, we came to open country. And here the same deadly desolation prevailed. Nowhere was sign of habitation, nowhere was trace of animate life, neither bird, nor animal, nor man. Nor anywhere could we discern evidence of cultivation, and even of vegetation of wild sorts was but little to be seen. Nothing but dull, gray-brown ground, and sad-colored rocks, with here and there a dingy, grayish-green shrub, stunted, distorted, isolate.

We came eventually to a low range of mountains, rocky, gloomy, and depressing to behold. It was while flying low over these that we for the first time saw water since we arrived on Aerth. In a rather wide valley we observed a narrow ribbon of sluggish, leaden-hued fluid meandering slowly along.

Ron Ti, who was then at the controls, brought our craft to a successful landing. This valley, especially near the stream banks, was the most fertile place we had thus far seen. There grew some fairly tall trees, and in places, clumps and thickets of pallidly green bushes as high as Hul Jok's head, or even higher. But tree-trunks and bushes alike were covered with dull red and livid purple and garish yellow fungi, which Vir Dax, after one look, pronounced poisonous to touch as well as to taste.

And here we found life, such as it was. *I* found it, and a wondrous start the ugly thing gave me! It was in semblance but a huge pulpy *blob* of a loathly blue color, in diameter over twice Hul Jok's height, with a gaping, triangular-shaped orifice for mouth, in which were set scarlet fangs; and that maw was in the center of the bloated body. At each corner of this mouth there glared malignant an oval, opaque, silvery eye.

Well it was for me that, in obedience to Hul Jok's imperative command, I was holding my Blastor pointing ahead of me; for as I blundered full upon the monstrosity it upheaved its ugly bulk—how, I do not know, for I saw no legs nor did it have wings—to one edge and would have flopped down upon me, but instinctively I slid forward the catch on the tiny Blastor, and the foul thing vanished—save for a few fragments of its edges—smitten into nothingness by the vibrations hurled forth from that powerful little disintegrator.

It was the first time I had ever used one of the terrific instruments, and I was appalled at the instantaneous thoroughness of its workings.

The Blastor made no noise—it never does, nor do the big Ak-Blastors which are the fighting weapons used on the Aethir-Torps, when they are discharging annihilation — but that nauseous ugliness I had removed gave vent to a sort of bubbling hiss as it returned to its original atoms; and the others of the party hastened to where I stood shaking from excitement—Hul Jok was wrong when he said it was fear!—and they questioned me as to what I had encountered.

Shortly afterward, Hul Jok found another one and called us all to see it, threw a rock the size of his head at it, hit it fairly in the center of its mouth; and the rock vanished inside and was apparently appreciated, for the nightmare quivered slightly, rippled a bit, and lay still. Hul Jok tried it with another rock, but had the mischance to hit his little pet in the eye—and seven Blastors sent that livid horror to whatever limbo had first spawned it! And it was above our heads in the air, hurling downward upon us when we blew it apart! Lightning scarcely moves swifter! Even Hul Jok was satisfied thereafter, when encountering one, to confine his caresses to pointing his Blastor and pressing the release stud,

instead of trying to play games with it.

But that was, after all, the sole type of life we found in that valley, although what the things fed upon we could not then ascertain, unless they devoured their own species.

We found others like them in another place—blob-things that could not be destroyed by our Blastors; and we saw, too, what they were fed with. But that in its proper place!

We spent some time here in this valley, but then finding nothing new, we again took to our craft and passed over the encircling mountains, only to find other mountains beyond. Also, other valleys.

At length we came to a larger valley than any we had before seen. This was, rather, a plain between two ranges, or, to speak more accurately, a flat where the range divided and formed a huge oval, to re-unite and continue as an unbroken chain farther on.

And here we again landed where a grove of trees gave concealment for our Aethir-Torp in case of—we did not know—anything! But upon us all there lay a heavy certitude that we were in a country inimical to our very continuance of existence.

Why? We could not tell that, yet each of us felt it, knew it, and, to some extent, feared it—for the bravest may well fear the unknown.

It was Mor Ag who had spoken the words which guided our actions for some time past.

"Were Aerth inhabited as we understand the word," he had said, sententiously, "the great city we saw would be no ruin, but teeming with life and activity, as was the custom of the Aerthons before the light of the Green Star waned. So, if any be still alive, it is in the wilderness we must seek them. Wherefore, one place is as another, until we learn differently."

How utterly right he was, speedily became manifest.

The pit-black murk of night slowly gave place to the pallid, wan daylight wherein no actual sunlight ever shone, and as we gathered up our Blastors and other impedimenta, preparatory to setting forth, Toj Qul raised a hand in warning.

There was no need for speech. We all heard what he did. I think the dead must hear that infernal, discordant din every time it is sounded. Describe it? I can not. There are no words adequate!

When our ears had somewhat recovered from the shock, Vir Dax shook his head.

"O-o-o-f-f-f!" he exclaimed. "To hear *that* very often would produce madness! It is agony!"

"Perhaps," growled Hul Jok. "But I have already gone mad because of it—gone mad with curiosity! Come along."

He was commander. We went, leaving our Aethir-Torp to care for itself. But never again were we thus foolish.

We proceeded warily, spread out in a line, each keeping within sight of the next. The noise had come from the north side of the flat, and thither we directed our steps. Well for us that we were hidden by the trees and bushes!

As one we came to a sudden halt, drew together in a group, staring amazed, incredulous, horrified.

We were at the very edge of the high-bush, and before us was open space clear to the foot of the towering cliff-walls, which rose sheer to some ten times the height of a tall male.

Half-way up this there stuck out a broad shelf of rock, extending completely across the face of the cliff from the western end to the eastern, and at regular intervals we could perceive large, rectangular openings, covered, or closed, by doors of some dully glinting, leaden-hued metal.

And all the space between the edge of bush-growth and the foot of the cliff was occupied by the same sort of loathly monstrosities as we had previously encountered! There they lay, expectant, apparently, for their attentions were seemingly concentrated upon the shelf of rock high in air above them.

A door close to the western end opened and a procession emerged therefrom. At last we had found——

"Great Power of Life!" ejaculated Mor Ag profanely. "Those beings are no Aerthons!"

And he was right. Aerth never had produced any such type as we then beheld!

They had faces, and they had not faces! They had forms and they were formless! How may I describe that which baffles description? We are accustomed to concrete, cohesive, permanent types of form and faces, and these were inchoate! Never in any two moments were their aspects the same. They elongated, contracted, widened, expanded. At one moment the lower parts of one of these beings would apparently vanish while the upper parts remained visible, and again, conditions were reversed. Or a front aspect faded instantaneously, leaving but the rear section visible, only to promptly reverse the phenomenon. Or a left side disappeared, leaving the right side perceptible; then—but picture it for yourself! I have said enough!

It made me dizzy; it provoked Mor Ag because he could not name them; it enraged Hul Jok, inflamed him with desire to attack the whole throng, shatter them—he could not have told why, but looking at them made him feel that way.

Ron Ti was mildly curious; Vir Dax frantic with ambition to study such beings. Our Lady of Bliss deliver me from the curiosity of such as Vir Dax, his methods of study!

Only Toj Qul and Lan Apo remained unperturbed; Toj Qul because he is a diplomat, therefore in nowise startled or amazed at, or by, anything. And Lan Apo was contemptuous; for as he looked at them, any race thus shifting as to bodily aspect must inevitably be shifty as to minds, and he had naught but despisal for a liar of any sort. Strange argument, strange stimulus to courage, yet perhaps as good as any!

Only one permanency had these beings—and even that fluctuated. They were of a silvery color, and they were black, of that blackness which is blacker than black. Later, we learned what manner of beings these were, and whence they came to afflict Aerth with their presences.

They formed in a row well back from the shelf-edge, and then, from out the same door from which they had emerged, came another procession, or rather, a rout or rabble. These were, as Mor Ag at once asserted, unmistakably Aerthons. But how had that once wise and mighty race fallen! For these men were little better than brutes. Naked, round-shouldered, bowed of heads, cringing, shambling of gait, matted as to hair, and bearded—the males, at least—and utterly crushed, broken, dispirited!

It had long been a proverb on all the inhabited planets, "As beautiful as the Aerthon women;" but the females we were then beholding were, if anything, more abject, more deteriorate, than the males.

Many things became apparent to us who stared at these poor unfortunates. Very evidently, some *things*, from some *where*, had enslaved, debased that once mighty race who were, or had been, second to none in all the universe—and this, *this*, was the result!

Hul Jok shifted his feet, stirred uneasily, growling venomously deep in his throat. Despite our giant's ferocious appearance, his heart was as a little child's, or like

that of a girl, gentle, tender, and sympathetic where wrong or oppression dared rear their ugly heads. And here, it was all too apparent, both those pit-born demons had been busily at work.

The rabble of Aerthons halted at the very edge of the shelf, grouped together, about equidistant from each end of the long line of the Things we could not name. And as the Aerthons stood there, the animate abhorrences on the ground fixed their malignant eyes upon the wretched creatures, the triangular mouths gaped wide, and from all that multitude of loathly *blobs* came beating against our shrinking, quivering, tormented ear-drums that same brain-maddening discordance we had previously heard, even before we left the Aethir-Torp.

Of a sudden the Things standing behind the Aerthons ceased flickering, became fixed as to forms, although the change was anything but improvement. For, although they became in shape like other living, sentient, intelligent beings, their faces bore all evil writ largely upon them.

Acquaint yourself with all depravity, debauchery, foul indecency ever known throughout the universe since the most ancient, forgotten times, multiply it even to Nth powers, limitless, and then you have not approximated their expressions!

Personally, even beholding such aspects made me feel as if, for eons uncountable, I had wallowed in vilest filth! And it affected the others the same way, and we knew, by our own experience, what had befallen the Aerthons.

Had such foul things once gained foothold on the great central sun, even the radiant purities of that abode of the perfected would have become tainted, polluted by a single glance at such unthinkable corruptiveness!

They, the Things, slowly raised each an arm, pointed at one Aerthon in the group. He, back to them as he was, quivered, shook, writhed; then, despite himself, he slowly rose in the air, moved out into space, hung above the *blobs* that waited, avid-mouthed. The Aerthon turned over in the air, head down, still upheld by the concentrated wills of the things that pointed. . . .

Breathless, my eyes well-nigh starting from my head at sheer horror of what must in another moment befall, I stared, waiting the withdrawal of the force upholding the wretched Aerthon.

Half consciously, I saw Hul Jok's Blastor swing into line with the poor shrieking victim, and, just as he commenced dropping toward those triangular, gaping, hideous orifices which waited, slavering, saw him vanish—and silently blessed Hul Jok for his clemency and promptitude.

Then, momentarily, we all went mad! Our Blastors aimed, we pressed the releases, and swept that line of Things. And, to our aghast horror, nothing happened. Again and again we swept their line—and they were unconscious that aught was assailing them! The deadly Blastors were impotent!

Ron Ti first grasped the situation.

"These Things are not 'beings'—they are but evil intelligences, of low order, crafty, vile, rather than wise! They are of too attenuate density—the vibrations of disintegration can not shatter, but pass unfelt through their atomic structures! We can do naught save in mercy slay those poor Aerthons, and destroy those foul corruptions which wait to be fed."

We did it! It was truest kindliness to the Aerthons. Yet, despite the seeming callousness of our deed, we knew it for the best. And one thing it proved to us—low as the Aerthons had sunk, they had not fallen so far from their divine estate but that in each the silver spark that distinguishes the soul-bearers from the

soulless was still present. For as each body resolved back to the primordial Aethir from whence it was formed, the silver spark, liberate at last, floated into the air until in distance it disappeared. Then we turned our attention to the blob-things.

But even as we smote the filthy Things, we noted that the strange beings on the rock-shelf had grasped the fact that a new phase of circumstance had entered into Aerth's affairs. They stood, amazed, startled, bewildered for a space of perhaps a minute, then passed into activity with a promptitude well-nigh admirable.

Several of them calmly stepped from the rock-shelf into air and came hurtling toward us. In some way they had sensed our direction. In no time, they hovered above us, descended, and confronted us.

One, evidently of importance among his fellows, made articulate sounds, but we could not understand. Nor did we wish to! For with such as those there can be but one common ground—unrelenting war!

And so, again and again we tried the effect of the Blastors, and, as previously, found them impotent. I caught Hul Jok's eye. He was fairly frothing at the mouth with wrath.

THE Things, close by, seemed to emanate a vibration that was abhorrent, stultifying. Little by little I felt a silent but urgent command to start toward the foot of the rocky cliff. Unthinkingly, I took a step forward, and Hul Jok's mighty arm slammed me back.

"I can feel it, too," he snarled at all six of us. "But," he thundered sternly, "I command you by the Looped Cross itself, that you stand fast. 'Tis but their *wills!* Are we babes, that we should obey?"

Suddenly—I laughed! Obey the wills of such as these? It was ridiculous! Answering laughter came from the rest of our party. Hul Jok nodded approvingly at me.

"Well done, Hak Iri!" he commended. "The Looped Cross thanks you—the Supreme Council shall give you right to wear it, for high courage, for service rendered!"

And he had promised me our planet's supremest gift, highest honor for—laughter! Yet, though I myself say it, perhaps the service was not so trivial after all. For there is, in final analysis, no weapon so thoroughly potent against evil as is laughter, ridicule! To take evil seriously is to magnify its importance; but ridicule renders its venom impotent, futile. Try it, you who doubt—try it in your hour of utmost need!

The Things became all black, no silvery tints remaining. One attempted to seize me, thrust me in the desired direction. Something—I had not known that it lay dormant within me—flamed into wrath. My hand closed, became a hard knot, my arm swung upward from my side with no volition on my part, and my fist drove full into the face of the Thing—left a horrible, blank orifice which slowly filled into semblance of a face again. The Thing emitted a strange, gasping squawk of pain.

"Aho!" shouted Hul Jok, gleefully. "They may not be shattered nor slain, but—they can be hurt!" And he swung his Blastor up as a truncheon and brought it down full on the head of the nearest. The stroke passed through the Thing as through soft filth, yet that Thing, evidently having enough, rose hurriedly into air and sped to safety, followed by the rest.

"Back to the Aethir-Torp!" commanded Hul Jok, and we retreated as swiftly as legs would take us. At that, we did not arrive there first.

To our dismay, we found it in possession of a horde of those Things. They were all over it, even inside; and worse still, all about it on the ground were Aerthons, a great crowd of them formed in solid masses, all facing outward, bearing in their

hands long, shimmering blades of brightly glinting metal, sharp as to points, with keen cutting edges.

"Swords," gasped Mor Ag. "I had thought such weapons obsolete on Aerth ten thousands years ago! Ware point and edge!"

"*Hue-hok!*" shouted Hul Jok. "The Blastors, quick!"

Oh, the pity of it! I know that tears streamed from my eyes before it was finished. Ron Ti was equally affected. Hul Jok himself was swearing strange oaths, and, had it not been for Lan Apo, I doubt if we had had the necessary fortitude to go through with the ghastly affair. But as the silver sparks floated upward, a smile, almost beatific, came upon his set, white face.

"But they are rejoicing!" he cried out to us who grieved even while we smote. "I can feel their gratitude flowing to us who give them release from a life which is worse than death. They are glad to depart thus painlessly!"

And thereafter we sorrowed no more.

THE Aerthons were almost all disposed of when Mor Ag shouted:

"Catch one or more of those slaves —alive! I would question——"

Hul Jok leapt forward, caught one by the wrist, wrenched his blade from his hand, slammed him against the hull of the Aethir-Torp, knocking him limp, threw him to us; and dealt likewise with another.

Meanwhile, our Blastors played unrelentingly, and presently there were no more of the unfortunate Aerthons to be seen. Yet, the Things who, through sheer will-force alone, had compelled the Aerthons to face annihilation—for they could not fight; the Blastors slew from far beyond reach of sword-blade or hurled rock—those Things still held our Aethir-Torp. Surely, Our Lady of Venhez kept them from guessing that they had but to slide the stud atop one of the great Ak-Blastors from the white space to the black one, and we—ugh! Well for us that there was no Lan Apo among them to catch our thoughts!

A long while afterward, we found out that they were acquainted with the principle of the Ak-Blastors—and I can only account for their not using those on us by the supposition that they wished to capture us alive in order to gratify their fiendish propensities, so refrained from slaying us, willing to go to any lengths rather than do so, for the dead can nowise be made to suffer!

We drew back, shaking from excitement and from the strain induced by their evil minds, or wills, beating upon us; for, though they could not make us obey, still that force they directed was almost solid in its impact. Our craft was still in their possession, and we were standing on open ground, and sorely perplexed as to how we were to regain possession of our Aethir-Torp.

Hul Jok, war prince, solved our dilemma. He grasped a young tree, thick as his wrist, tore it from the ground, broke it across his knee——

"Club!" he grunted. "Our million-year-ago ancestors used such on Venhez. There are records of such in the Central War Castle!"

Hurriedly he prepared one for each of us, talking as he wrought.

"They can *feel*," he growled, "for all that they may not be slain. Very well! We will beat them from the Aethir-Torp!"

And that is precisely what occurred. On Venhez I had, at times, worked with my hands, for sheer delight of muscle-movement. But never had I dreamed what actual hard work was until that hour, during which, club in hand, we stormed our own craft, until at last we stood watching the last of the Things as they rapidly passed through the air toward their cliff-abode—all but one, which we had finally cornered alone

in a compartment into which it had strayed from the rest. We hemmed it about, beat it with our clubs until it cringed from the pain. Then Ron Ti thrust his face close to its face. . . .

We caught Ron's idea, added our wills to his, overbore that of our captive. It became confused, bewildered, shifted from silver to black, to silver again; the black became dull, smoky; the silver paled to leaden hue; the Thing crouched, palpitant with fear-waves, manifest in dim coloration.

"We have learned enough," declared Ron Ti solemnly. "Back to Venhez! This is matter for the Supreme Council, as I feared even before we started. Here we can not cope with conditions; we seven are too small a force. Back to Venhez!"

"Nay," Hul Jok demurred. "Let us remain and clean Aerth of this spawn!" And he indicated the captive Thing with a contemptuous gesture of his foot.

But Vir Dax added his voice to that of Ron Ti; and I—I was eager to go—to stay—I knew not which. The others felt as I did. Both courses had their attractions—also their drawbacks. For myself, I fear me very greatly that I, Hak Iri, who ever held myself aloof from all emotions of violence, desiring clear mind that I might better chronicle the deeds of others—I fear, I say, that in me still lives something of that old Hak Iri, my remote ancestor who, once in the Days of Wilderness of which our minstrels still sing, made for himself a name of terror on all Venhez for his love of strife.

But Mor Ag really settled the argument.

"We have this—Thing," he declared. "It must be examined, if we would learn aught of its nature, and that must be done if we hope ever to cope with such as it has proved to be in structure"—here an unholy light shone transient in the keen, cold eyes of Vir Dax—"and we can, while on the return to Venhez, learn what has actually happened to Aerth from the two Aerthons——"

"One Aerthon!" interrupted Vir Dax. "The other died. Hul Jok knows not his own strength!"

He bent over, examined the living Aerthon and promptly brought him back to consciousness. Mor Ag spoke to him. The Aerthon brightened a trifle as he became assured we meant him no harm. He brightened still more when he observed that we held captive one of his former masters.

Then the Thing caught the Aerthon's eye, and Lan Apo hastily turned to Hul Jok.

"It were well to confine this—where the Aerthon may not win to it," he warned emphatically. "Otherwise the will of the Thing will compel the enslaved fool to assist it to escape or work us harm in some manner."

We left the captive Thing in the little room, fastened the sole door, and Hul Jok retained the ward-strip which alone could unlock it again. The Aerthon said something to Mor Ag, who smiled and patted him on the shoulder, reassuringly.

"He thanked us for putting it beyond his power to obey——"

He broke off to ask the Aerthon another question, then gasped.

"Dear Mother of Life!" he ejaculated. "The Things are from the dark side of the Moun, Aerth's satellite!"

The Aerthon nodded.

"*Avitchi!*" he exclaimed, and added another word: "Hell!"

We knew not his language—that is, none save Mor Ag—but we all caught his meaning. He referred to the abode of evil, as it was understood on Aerth.

WE WOULD have questioned the Aerthon further through the medium of Mor Ag, for we all were intensely curious, but just then that occurred which put an end to questioning, and served likewise to hasten

our departure from this sorely afflicted planet.

A crackling, sizzling hiss of lightning and a terrific crash of thunder—the world, so far as we were immediately concerned, all one blinding glare of violet-tinted light—and the great Aethir-Torp rocked under the impact.

"Aho!" shouted Hul Jok. "What now?" And he dashed to one of the lookout openings just as another levin-bolt struck.

We joined him, and one glance was enough. All about us and above us were swarming great iridescent globes, and it was from these that there now came incessant streaks and flashes of lightning—powerful electric currents.

Our commander leapt into the conning-tower, and the others of us sprang each to his station at one of the Ak-Blastors, of which our craft mounted six, and we promptly left the ground.

We had little to fear, for the metal Berulion, of which Aethir-Torps are built, could in nowise be harmed by lightning, nor could we who were inside be shocked thereby. But some part of the controlling mechanism might have been seriously disarranged by the jarring concussions, and, besides, it was not part of our natures to submit tamely to attacks from any source.

With a *swoosh* we shot into air and Hul Jok headed the sharp-pointed nose of our great fighting cylinder straight into the thick of the shining globes that swooped and floated and swirled about and above us. Their thin walls gave them no protection against our impact, and we shattered them as easily as breaking the shells of eggs.

With the Ak-Blastors we could and did shatter some of the globes which we failed to ram, but the vibrations of disintegration from these had no more effect upon the occupants of the globes than had the little hand Blastors previously—and Hul Jok fairly stamped in rage.

"Ron Ti," he exclaimed wrathfully, "your science is but a fraudulent thing! We mount your improved model Blastors, purported to slay aught living, disintegrate anyone, and now——"

His anger well-nigh choked him.

"Content you," soothed Ron. "If we come again to Aerth——"

"If we come again to Aerth," Hul Jok asserted grimly, "Aerth will be *cleaned,* or I return no more to Venhez! But," he went on, imperatively, "you must find that which will destroy these Lunarions. We shattered and rammed their foolish globes, from which they play with the powers of thunder and lightning, but them we might not harm. They did but float, insolent, safely down to Aerth!"

"We have one Lunarion upon whom to experiment," suggested Vir Dax meaningly.

"Ay," snapped Hul Jok. "And I look to you and Ron Ti to produce results! See to it that you fail not!"

I have known the giant commander since we were children together, but never had I seen him in such a mood. He seemed beside himself with what, in a lesser man, I should have classed as humiliation, but I realized, as did the others, that it was merely that in him the dignity of the Looped Cross had been proffered insult, amounting well-nigh to defeat, and that to him the Looped Cross, emblem of our planet, was a sacred symbol, his sole object of adoration; and his high, fierce spirit was sore, smarting grievously, and could nowise be appeased until, as he himself had phrased it, "Aerth was clean!"

WE HAD formally made report to the Supreme Council and had handed over to them, for disposal, both the Aerthon and the Lunarion we had brought back with us. And the Supreme Council, in their wisdom, had commanded Mor Ag and

Vir Dax to examine and question the Lunarion, with me to make records of aught he might say—but he would say naught, seemingly taking fiendish delight in baffling us.

The Aerthon, whose name was Jon, had told Mor Ag, while we were on our homeward flight, all that was to be known as to the conditions on Aerth. Here is no space to record it all, but briefly it was as follows:

Centuries ago, the Aerthons, divided into nations, warred. A mighty empire, hoping to dominate the planet, attacked a little country as a commencement. Another and larger nation hastened to the rescue of its tiny neighbor. A great island kingdom was drawn into the fray. A powerful republic overseas took hand in the matter; so, ended the strife.

But rather than ending warfare, it did but give fresh incentive to inventions of deadly devices. Somebody found that the element—metal—gold, had strange qualities, previously unguessed. Another discovered that gold could be produced by artificial means, synthetically, to use Aerthly terminology. But the producing was by drawing it from out the storehouse of the universe, the primordial Aethir, wherein, dormant, are all things objective and subjective. And the drain on the Aethir opened strange doors in space, which heretofore, by fiat of the Great Wisdom, had been fast sealed.

Scientists of a great race, Mongulions, made too free use of the Aethir, hoping in their turn to subjugate the races of the West. Because of the vibrations set up in their labors, they made easy passage from Aerth to Moun. And on the dark side of the Moun dwelt a race of fiends, soulless, beyond the pale of the Infinite Mercy, who moved about to keep the Moun's bulk always between them and the hated light of the Sun. These had ever hated Aerth and its dwellers, for once they had inhabitated that fair planet, until they became too wicked, and they, and the Moun, broken from its parent Aerth by Almighty wrath, had been set apart in the sea of space. The Moun, although circling ever about its parent planet, revolved never on an axis, so had one side turned ever toward Aerth; and these Lords of the Dark Face, in their eon-old hate, saw chance, at long last, to regain their lost world, upon which they looked with envy when the lunar phases brought them during the dark of the Moun to the side facing Aerth. In their Selenion globes they invaded Aerth, availing themselves of the openings the Mongulions had unwittingly established.

Aided by these unholy powers of evil, the Mongulions had dominated, even as they had planned, all other races, reduced them to conditions of abject servitude, and were, in turn, subjugated by the Lords of the Dark Face, through sheer will-energy alone.

So, reduced to conditions wherein they were less than beasts, the Aerthons had remained, prey to their fiendish conquerors, subjected to such treatments as even now, while I write, sicken my soul within me to think of, and are unfit to describe—for why afflict clean minds with unnecessary corruptions?

Only those who have heard that Aerthon's story can conceive of what had, for ages, taken place in the ghastly orgies of the Lunarions—and we who did hear will never again be quite the same as we were before our ears were thus polluted.

So utterly abhorrent were conditions on Aerth that our Supreme Council decreed that such must be abolished at any cost. Not the planet, but the state of affairs prevailing. For they feared that the very Aethir would become putrescent, and moral degeneracy reach eventually to every planet of the Universal Chain!

But that, again, involved every planet in the matter. So they, the council, sent out invitation to all

other planets for conference. Then came delegates from them all. They talked, discussed, debated, consulted —and that was all.

Hul Jok, the practical, violated interplanetary etiquette, finally.

"Talk!" he shouted, rising from where he sat with the other Venhezians. "What does talk do? We be no nearer than when we started. Since none can offer helpful suggestion, hear me! I am War Prince of Venhez, not a sage, but I say that Ron Ti, if allowed sufficient time, can find that which will slay these Lunarions—all of their evil brood, and that is what is needed. Leave this matter to us of Venhez!"

A gravely genial delegate from Jopitar rose in his place.

"Oh, you of Venhez," he said in his stately, courtly speech, "your War Prince has spoken well. Since Ron Ti is acknowledged greatest of inventors on any world, he has but to demand, and if we of Jopitar can place aught at his disposal to further his investigations, he has but to communicate with us, and what we have is at his disposal."

One by one, delegates from all the planets confirmed the Jopitarian's proffer, repeating it for those whom they represented. And one delegate, a huge, red-hued, blue-eyed being, went even farther, for, springing to his feet, he thundered:

"But if there is to be actual affray, we of Mharz demand that we participate!"

Hul Jok strode forward and slapped the Mharzion on the shoulder.

"Aho!" he laughed. "One after my own heart! Brother, it is in my mind that crafts and fighters from all the planets will be needed before this matter is ended!"

It seems cruel, I know, but what else was there to do? From then on, that captive Lunarion was subjected to strange, some of them frightful, tests. Poisons and acids Vir Dax found had no effect upon him. Cutting instruments hurt, but failed to injure him permanently. Already we knew that the Blastors —deadliest weapons known to any planet—were ineffective.

Ron Ti was at his wits' end! Two of our Venhezian years passed, and all to no progress. Then a girl solved for him the one problem he was beginning to despair of ever solving for himself.

He had a love—who of all Venhez has not?—and she, entering fully into his ideals and ambitions with that sweetly sympathetic understanding none but a maid of Venhez can bestow, had free access at all times to his workshop, wherein he toiled and studied for planetary benefit.

And she one day seeing his distress at bafflement in his researches, saying naught, withdrew, returning shortly bearing in her arms her chiefest treasure, an instrument of many strings from which she proceeded to draw sweet strains of music, hoping thus to soothe his perturbed mind.

There came a wondrously sweet strain recurring in her melody, and the first time it sounded, the Lunarion winced. Repetition of that strain made him howl! And realization came to Ron Ti in one blinding flash of lightlike clarity.

"Harmony!" he shouted, rejoicing. "The blob-thing is discordant in its essential nature!"

Never a maid of all Venhez was so proud just then as that love-girl of Ron Ti's. She had, at least, produced some sort of impression on the fiend, made it suffer grievously. So over and over she played that selfsame strain, and, ere many minutes had passed, the Lunarion fell prone, writhing in anguish, howling like a thing demented.

"Enough, Alu Rai," Ron bade her after watching the captive's misery for a space. "You have rendered the universe a service! Now depart, for I would think. Herein lies the

secret of the weapon which will purge an afflicted world of its wo!''

IT WAS a mighty fleet which started for Aerth on that never-to-be-forgotten expedition of rescue and reprisal. Practically speaking, all the craft were of similar appearance, for the Aethir-Torps had long been conceded to be the most efficient type for inter-spatial voyaging. Even the Aerthons had used them before they were subjugated, and Jon the Aerthon stated that the Lunarions themselves had a large fleet of them housed away in readiness against the day when they might desire to win to other worlds. But, he likewise told us, until the Lunarions had exhausted Aerth's resources, they would remain there, and for Aerthly voyaging in air their Selenion globes were more satisfactory to them, moved by will-force as they were, than the great Aethir-Torps which were managed by purely mechanical methods.

Naturally, the Aethir-Torps from the different planets varied slightly, as, for example, those of Venhez had the conning-towers cylindrical in shape, and placed midway from nose to stern; the noses sharply pointed, sterns tapering to half the size of the greatest diameter—that of the waist of the craft; our Ak-Blastors were long, slender, copper-plated. The Aethir-Torps from Mharz were lurid red in color; blunt of nose; rounded as to sterns; with short, thick Ak-Blastors; and their conning-towers were well forward of the middle; octagonal in shape. But why amplify? Surely the Aethir-Torps of each planet are familiar to the dwellers of all the other planets.

And, of course, each craft bore the symbol of its home-world. The Mharzions bore the Looped Dart in gold, even as we of Venhez painted upon the nose of ours the Looped Cross—but the symbols of the worlds are too well known to require description.

Ron Ti and Hul Jok had full authority over the entire squadron, although the war-commanders from all the worlds fully understood the carefully laid plans of aggression. And all the Aethir-Torps, in addition to the Ak-Blastors, now mounted before their conning-towers a new device consisting of a large tube, much like an enormous *houtar,* terminating at the snout-end in five smaller tubes.

IT WAS black night when Aerth was reached. And it was not until the sickly, wan daylight broke that actual operations commenced.

Spreading out, we quartered the air until the great oval flat showed plain. It was our good luck that it was our own craft which was the first to come above it, and, as we identified it, Hul Jok's eyes glowed in wrathful joy—if such emotion may be thus contradictorily described. He caught Ron Ti's eye and nodded.

Ron Ti, obeying, threw over a lever. A most dreadful and terrific din shook the air with its uproar. From afar to the northward came a similar bellowing howl. Then from the eastward the same sound reached our ears, being replied to, a moment later, by the signal from the distant west. And from the southward came the answering racket, and we knew that all Aerth's surface was under surveillance of one or more of the Aethir-Torps comprising the Expeditionary Fleet.

Slowly, deliberately, we began circling above that infernal ovoid valley. But after that one hideous, bellowing howl, the tubelike arrangements before the conning-towers changed their tones, and from them came the same wondrously sweet, heart-thrilling, soul-shaking strain of melody as that which Alu Rai, the love-maid of Ron Ti, had produced to the exquisite torment of our captive Lunarion.

Over and over the strains were played, and still nothing happened. The idea was Ron Ti's, and I began to wonder if in some manner he had miscalculated. Suppose it did not affect all the Lunarions alike? In that case not only would the expedition be doomed to failure, but the name of Ron Ti would become the subject for many a jest on many a world. And we of Venhez must, perforce, walk with bowed heads.

But Ron Ti was smiling, and Hul Jok's fierce face bore an expression of confident, savage expectancy, and I—I waited, curious, hopeful still.

So swiftly that we could barely see it, an iridescent globe spun through the air, rising diagonally from the cliff-base, shooting straight at our Aethir-Torp. A touch of Ron's hand, and the strain of music sounded even louder, clearer, sweeter.

The globe, when within a quarter of a mile, shot straight upward, discharged a terrific, blinding flash of chain-lightning against our craft, followed it by a second and even more intense discharge—and still the sweet strain of harmony was all our reply.

The globe swooped until it nearly touched us—and I slid forward the stud on the Ak-Blastor behind which I stood.

The Lunarion bubble was not more than a hundred feet away at that instant, and, like a bubble, it vanished incontinently. As ever, for all that we could shatter their Selenion Globes, those demoniacal Lunarions themselves we could not disintegrate, or so we deemed then, and I know that I said wrathful profanities in my impotent disappointment.

But Hul Jok grinned, and Ron Ti nodded reassuringly to me, saying consolingly: "Wait!"

Well, I waited. What else could I do? But by this time the same game was going on all over the Aerth. Wherever the Lunarions had abode, the strains of melody were driving them into a frenzy of madness, and they came swarming forth in their globes, hurling lightning-flashes at our Aethir-Torps, which might not thus be destroyed.

Yet, in a way, honors were even, for if they could not damage our Aethir-Torps, neither could we do aught but blow their globes into nothingness, while they themselves did but flee through the air back to their abodes, unharmed by the vibrations from the Ak-Blastors.

And in this manner, for three days and nights the futile warfare continued, and by morning of the fourth day I doubt if there was left to the Lunarions a single Selenion Globe. At least, for two days and nights, we continued playing that music over and over until all Aerth vibrated from the repetitional sound-waves.

But on the next morning following, we had clear proof that the Lunarions had had all that they could endure of suffering. An Aethir-Torp, of a far different model from any we were acquainted with, shot into air with incredible speed, and catching a craft of Saturn unawares, rammed it in midair, completely wrecking it—only to be shattered into dust in its turn by the Ak-Blastors of a Markhurian Aethir-Torp. The crew of the ill-fated craft we could not save, but they were amply avenged ere long.

It happened that we witnessed this ramming, and Mor Ag shouted his surprize.

"But that Aethir-Torp, despite its speed, is of an age-old model," he affirmed excitedly, and Hul Jok nodded agreement.

"Our Lady of Love grant that their Ak-Blastors be of equally antiquated model," he chortled. "If they are, their vibrations are of too long and too slow wave-lengths to affect the modern Berulion metal of which we now build our fighting craft!"

And so it later proved to be.

We could very easily have shattered their old-model crafts, taking our own good time therefor, but to what avail? It would leave us the same old problem. The Lunarions, with their levitational powers, would descend safely to the ground and would still inhabit Aerth, overrunning it like the evil vermin that they were.

But the far-thinking brains of Ron Ti and Hul Jok had laid out a carefully evolved plan, and aside from continuing to drive the Lunarions mad with the hated music and evading further collisions with their Aethir-Torps (no light task, either, considering their speed) we of the expedition refrained from using our Ak-Blastors until the Lunarions must have come to the very conclusion our master-strategists desired them to reach eventually—that in some manner we had exhausted our vibratory charges.

At last, one morning we were made the objects of a concerted attack. From all points came hurtling those old-style Aethir-Torps, and we—we fled from before them! Finding that their old-model Ak-Blastors had little or no effect upon us, protected as we were by the Berulion plates, they fell back on their levin-bolts, and these they hurled incessantly, until they, as well as we, were well out of Aerth's atmosphere, and into the great Ocean of Aethireal Space.

But ever we played that same maddening music, and it acted as powerful incentive to hold them to the pursuit, for they had lost all caution in their rage. And ever, as we fled from before them, we laughed.

And at last, some five million miles from Aerth's surface, we turned upon them!

Stretched out in a long, curved line, we awaited their coming, and as they came within our range, every Aethir-Torp commenced whirling about as if on a transverse axis, presenting one moment the nose, next a side, then the stern, and again the other side, and once more the stem or prow, in this manner giving play to all six Ak-Blastors—the forward one, the two on each side, and the one pointing to rearward.

And the Lunarions, although heretofore we might not injure them, were soon without protection, their Aethir-Torps shattered, left exposed to the deadly chill of outer space, and their forms, loose though they were in structure, subjected to the awful pressure of the inelastic Aethir!

It compressed their bodies as if they had been density itself. And, having no defense, they instinctively drew close to each other — and Aethiric pressure did all that was necessary.

They were jammed into a single mass, and *then* we played upon that with the Ak-Blastors until that mass, too, became as nothing!

Only from that blank space where the fiends, the Lords of the Dark Face, had been, floated in all directions a shower or swarm of dull red sparks, which, even as we watched, slowly flickered and burned out in depths of Abysmal Night!

Ron Ti bowed his head in reverence to that great Power which had permitted us to be the instruments of its vengeance, signing in the air before him the Looped Cross, symbol of Life.

"As I suspected," he said, gravely, "they were soulless. They had naught but form and vitality, mind and will—life of the lower order, nonenduring. The red sparks proved that—and even those have burned out, resolved back into the Sea of Undifferentiated Energy. Our work is ended. Let Aerth work out its own rehabilitation. That wondrous race of Aerthons will soon rear the foundations of an even greater civilization than their world has ever before known."

THE EYRIE

IN OUR November issue we asked you, the readers, whether you wanted us to use an occasional story from early issues of WEIRD TALES as our monthly "Weird Story Reprint." It was not our intention to reprint any of our own stories until ten years after their first publication in this magazine, which is only six years old; but so many readers had written asking us to reprint this, that and the other story that we put the decision squarely up to you.

Your answer has been given in a flood of letters to The Eyrie, asking us to give you some of the best-liked tales from earlier issues; and as the present issue goes to press, your decision is unanimous. So, as this month's "Weird Story Reprint" we are giving you Nictzin Dyalhis' story, *When the Green Star Waned.* This was published in WEIRD TALES four years ago, and it attained greater popularity than any other story we have ever printed. In three or four months we will give you another four-year-old story, probably Frank Owen's ethereally beautiful Chinese tale, *The Wind that Tramps the World;* for you seem to have your hearts set on reading this story again. From time to time we shall give you others. Numbers of requests have been received for the reprint of *The Phantom Farmhouse,* by Seabury Quinn; *The Stranger from Kurdistan,* by E. Hoffmann Price; *The Night Wire,* by H. F. Arnold; *The Woman of the Wood,* by A. Merritt; and *The Outsider,* by H. P. Lovecraft. The three last-named are too recent for us to reprint them soon; but we will eventually reprint these also, in accordance with your wishes.

"By all means cut out the old uninteresting reprints and use nothing in that space but reprints from the back issues of WEIRD TALES," writes C. Edward Christianson, of Brooklyn.

Writes F. J. Simmons, of Skowhegan, Maine: "I like W. T. because it is different. It takes me out of the rut, away from the inane affairs of life. This letter was prompted by the request of the editor for a vote as to reprinting tales from their own issues. I would vote yes, under certain conditions. First, that the yarns be at least one year old. Second, that the most likely be submitted to a vote of the readers. Third, that the proportion of WEIRD TALES' own tales to the classics be not less than one to five. There are some tales in the back files which your readers have not read—tales published

before they began reading the magazine. Others have been forgotten by them. It is only fair to suppose that the magazine is gaining new readers steadily. Give them a chance."

Miss L. Selingson, of New York City, writes to The Eyrie: "Regarding the 'Weird Tale Reprint' I wish to say that I am sure those who did not read your magazine when *The Wind That Tramps the World* was printed would very much like to do so. I know that I would appreciate a reprint of same immensely. Your November reprint, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, has been read by every boy and girl who ever attended grammar school, so the reason of it being unfair to the other readers who have already read this story is really no reason at all. The name fascinates me. It gives me a melancholy feeling, and makes me think of the wind howling down a chimney and rattling the windows and moaning through the tree tops. So please reprint this story."

"The best criticism of your magazine," writes LeRoy E. Fess, of Crittenden, New York, "is that it contains good yarns consistently. So many magazines keep their high quality until they have won their reputation and then seem to get careless and begin using inferior stuff. I hope the time will come when you can see your way clear to issuing the magazine twice a month, as it is rather tough on the fans to have to wait a whole month for their favorite reading."

Lester Anderson, of Hayward, California, writes to The Eyrie: "I say yes, by all means, reprint the cream of your earlier stories. But, better still, I wish you would try an experiment. I am sure it will be a success. That is, to put out a 'Weird Tales Supplement,' the same size as the monthly, but having a black cover to distinguish it. In this supplement you could have a long novel (cover illustration), novelette, and short stories from the early issues of WEIRD TALES. And then you will have to publish that very short tale —the most mysterious thing I ever read—which appears in September, 1926: *The Night Wire*, by H. F. Arnold."

"By all means, reprint some of your best stories," writes J. Ernest Wagner, of Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. "The majority of your present readers can not get copies containing the first of your best."

Writes Wilford Allen, from Santa Rosa, California: "I can't overlook the chance to add my plea to the others for more stories from the author of *The Night Wire*. He must have a lot of other good yarns in his system. When I read it I turned to the wife and said, 'Here's a story that ought to be brought to O'Brien's notice. It belongs in his collection of the best stories of the year.'"

Norman H. Moore, of Vancouver, British Columbia, writes to The Eyrie: "WEIRD TALES is one of the very few publications that is worth the price asked. In fact, were a higher price demanded I would gladly pay it, because your publication is exactly what you term it: 'The Unique Magazine.' Don't ever spoil it by diluting the quality of the stories printed, or by cutting down the magazine. As to the authors, in my mind Seabury Quinn stands on the

(Continued on page 134)

FUTURE ISSUES

A WEALTH of fascinating stories is scheduled for early publication in WEIRD TALES, the unique magazine. The brilliant success of WEIRD TALES has been founded on its unrivaled, superb stories of the strange, the grotesque and the terrible—gripping stories that stimulate the imagination and send shivers of apprehension up the spine—tales that take the reader from the humdrum world about us into a deathless realm of fancy—marvelous tales so thrillingly told that they seem very real. WEIRD TALES prints the best weird fiction in the world today. If Poe were alive he would undoubtedly be a contributor. In addition to creepy mystery stories, ghost-tales, stories of devil-worship, witchcraft, vampires and strange monsters, this magazine also prints the cream of the weird-scientific fiction that is written today—tales of the spaces between the worlds, surgical stories, and stories that scan the future with the eye of prophecy. Among the amazing tales in the next few issues will be:

THE DUNWICH HORROR, *by H. P. Lovecraft*

The author of "The Call of Cthulhu" rises to new heights of terror and horror in this powerful story—a tale in which the horror creeps and grows, and finally bursts full-blown upon the reader.

THE RAT, *by S. Fowler Wright*

The author of "The Deluge" has written for this magazine a fascinating weird tale about a physician who discovered the secret of revitalizing the body cells to give eternal life—a tale of a gruesome murder, and a perplexed coroner's jury.

THE SEA HORROR, *by Edmond Hamilton*

Picture a flood of water, two miles wide, shooting up from the deeps of ocean, and the constantly rising sea threatening to cover the highest mountains. Panic terror overwhelmed the peoples of the world, until—but that is the story.

THE DEVIL-PEOPLE, *by Seabury Quinn*

Jules de Grandin goes into action against a band of strange foes, who have trailed their victims from the Malay Archipelago to the United States, and strewn their paths with brutal murders.

THE SHADOW OF A NIGHTMARE, *by Donald Wandrei*

Tucked away in a corner of the Himalayas was a strange country, inhabited entirely by madmen; and from a manuscript that found its way to the outer world from this Country of the Mad stalked forth nightmare and horror.

THE BRASS KEY, *by Hal K. Wells*

Bull Partlow runs afoul of the Chinese, Foo Chong, who devises a hideous ordeal for the thug, yet gives him a chance for his life—a grim tale of venomous spiders.

THE LAUGHING THING, *by G. G. Pendarves*

Eldred Werne signed away his estates to Jason Drewe, and then died, but the terrific manifestations at the manor showed that he wielded more power dead than alive—a powerful ghost-story.

THESE are but a few of the many super-excellent stories in store for the readers of WEIRD TALES. To make sure of getting your copy each month, and thus avoid the embarrassment of finding your favorite news stand sold out, just fill out the coupon below and let us send it right to your home. That's the safest way.

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(Continued from page 132)

heights of Olympus, fit dweller with the gods. His stories can not be improved."

"I thoroughly approve of P. S. Miller's suggestion in the November Eyrie that you should occasionally print one of your own stories from early issues in the 'Weird Story Reprint' space," writes Harold Jung from Milwaukee. "But an even better plan would be to reprint them in book form, as you have already done with *The Moon Terror*. What a thriller that was! I vote right now for a collection of Seabury Quinn's de Grandin stories, and also a book of H. P. Lovecraft's eldritch thrillers."

"I have just finished reading the November WEIRD TALES and can truthfully say that I have enjoyed it more than any previous number," writes E. M. Cleland, of Meaford, Ontario. "I am a new reader, having read only about six numbers of the magazine, but certainly this number beats them all. There wasn't a story which I didn't like. I was crazy about *The Polar Doom*. That's the kind of tale that I like best."

Writes Walter Weeden, of Mexico, New York: "I, for one of many, suggest, ask, beg, request and plead that you use old stories from back issues of WEIRD TALES in your 'reprint.' Stories with catchy titles as *The People of the Comet* and *The Wind That Tramps the World* would bring many new readers to the magazine."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? First choice in the November issue, as shown by your votes, is accorded to *The Polar Doom*, by Edmond Hamilton, which is closely pressed by Adolphe de Castro's story, *The Last Test*.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE JANUARY WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	**Why?** ----------
(2)----------	----------

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Reader's name and address:

The Black Master

(Continued from page 20)

Dr. Trowbridge knows my father, Fabian Warner."

I nodded agreement, and she continued:

"Tonight I went to a Christmas Eve party at Mr. and Mrs. Partridge's. It was a masquerade affair, but I just wore a domino over my evening dress, since we were to unmask at midnight, anyway, and I thought I'd feel more comfortable in 'citizen's clothes' than I would dancing in some sort of elaborate costume.

"There wasn't anything unusual about the party, or about the first part of the evening, that I remember, except, of course, everyone was talking about the mysterious murder of those two poor women.

"They danced a German just before midnight, and I was pretty hot from the running around, so I stepped into the conservatory to slip out of my domino a moment and cool off.

"I'd just taken the gown off when I felt a touch on my arm, and turning round found a man staring into my face. I thought he must be one of the guests, of course, though I couldn't remember having seen him. He wore a jerkin of bright red leather with a wide black belt about his waist, a red fez with gold-and-black tassel, and loose trousers tucked into tall boots. His face was concealed with a black-silk handkerchief instead of a regular mask, and, somehow, there was something menacing and terrifying about him. I think it must have been his eyes, which glittered in the light like those of an animal at night.

"I started back from him, but he edged after me, extending his hand to stroke my arm, and almost fawning on me. He made queer, inarticulate sounds in his throat, too.

"'Go away,' I told him. 'I don't

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know you and I don't want to. Please leave me alone.' By that time he'd managed to crowd me into a corner, so that my retreat into the house was cut off, and I was getting really frightened.

"'If you don't let me go, I'll scream,' I threatened, and then, before I had a chance to say another word, out shot one of his hands—ugh, they were big and thin and long, like a gorilla's!—and grasped me by the throat.

"I tried to fight him off, and even as I did so there flashed through my mind the description Miss Müller gave of her murderer. Then I knew. I was helpless in the grasp of the killer! That's all I remember till I regained consciousness with Dr. Trowbridge's housekeeper drying me after my bath and you gentlemen standing outside the door, ready to help me downstairs.

"Did they catch him—the murderer?" she added with true feminine curiosity.

"But of course, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin assured her gravely. "*I* was on his trail. It was impossible he should escape.

"Attend me, my friends," he ordered, slipping from his seat on the table and striding to the center of the room like a lecturer about to begin his discourse. "Last night, when we entered that accursed tomb, I had too many thoughts within my so small brain to give full attention to any one of them. In my hurry I did overlook many important matters. That root of mandrake, by example, I should have suspected its significance, but I did not. Instead, I tossed it away as an unconsidered trifle.

"Mandrake, or mandragora, my friends, was one of the most potent charm-drugs in the ancient pharmacopœia. With it the barren might be rendered fecund; love forgotten might be reawakened; deep and lasting coma might be induced by it. Does not that Monsieur Shakespeare make Cleopatra say:

'Give me to drink of mandragora,
That I might sleep out this great gap of time
My Antony is away'?

Most certainly.

"Moreover, it had another, and less frequent use. Placed upon the grave of one guilty of manifold sins, *it would serve to keep his earthbound spirit from walking.* You perceive the connection.

"When we cast aside that root of mandragora, we did unseal a tomb which was much better left unopened, and did release upon the world a spirit capable of working monstrous evil. Yes. This 'Black Master,' I do know him, Friend Trowbridge.

"When we looked upon the poor relics of those slain women, I noticed at once the peculiarity of the bruises on their throats. '*Parbleu,*' I say to me, 'the skeleton which we saw last night, he had a hand so maimed as to leave a mark like this. Jules de Grandin, we must investigate.'

" 'Make it so,' I reply to me in that mental conversation, and so, Friend Trowbridge, when I left you I did repair instantly to that cursed tomb and look about. There, in his coffin of stone, lay the skeleton of the 'Black Master', but, as I have already been at pains to tell you, on his side, not as we left him lying the night before. '*Mordieu,* this are not good, this are most badly strange,' I inform me. Then I look about and discover the bit of mandrake root, all shriveled and dried, and carelessly tossed to one side where we left it when Friend Trowbridge let fall his light. I——"

"By the way, de Grandin," I put in. "Something hit me a paralyzing blow on the knuckles before I let my flashlight fall; have you any idea what it was?"

He favored me with a momentary frown, then: "But certainly," he responded. "It were a bit of stone

from the ceiling. I saw it detach itself and cried a warning to you, even as it fell, but the loss of our light was of such importance that I talked no more about your injury. Now, to resume:

"'Can we not now seal him in the tomb with the mandrake once more?' I ask me as I stand beside that coffin today, but better judgment tell me not to attempt it. This old-time sea-devil, he have been able to clothe his bony frame with seeming habiliments of the flesh. He are, to all intents and purposes, once more alive, and twice as wicked as before on account of his long sleep. I shall kill his fantasmal body for good and all before I lock him once and forever in the tomb again.

"'But how shall we slay him so that he be really-truly dead?' I ask me.

"Then, standing beside the coffin of that old, wicked pirate, I think and think deeply. 'How were the were-wolves and witches, the wizards and the warlocks, the bugbears and goblins of ancient times slain in the olden days?' I ask, and the answer comes back, 'With bullets of silver.' Attend me, my friends."

Snatching a red leather volume from the near-by shelf he thumbed quickly through its pages. "Hear what your Monsieur Whittier say in one of his so lovely poems. In the olden times, the garrison of a New England fort was beset by

. . . a spectral host, defying stroke of steel and aim of gun;
Never yet was ball to slay them in the mold of mortals run!

Midnight came; from out the forest moved a dusky mass that soon
Grew to warriors, plumed and painted, grimly marching in the moon.
"Ghosts or witches," said the captain, "thus I foil the Evil One!"
And *he rammed a silver button from his doublet down his gun.*

"Very good. I, too, will thus foil the Evil One and his servant who once

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more walks the earth. I have told you how I had the bullets made to my order this day. I have recounted how I baptized them for the work they were to do this night. Yourselves saw how the counter-charm worked against that servitor of Satan, how it surprized him when it pierced his phantom breast, how it made of him a true corpse, and how the seeming-flesh he had assumed to clothe his bare bones while he worked his evil was made to melt away before the bullets of Jules de Grandin. Now, doubly dead, he lies sealed by the mandrake root within his tomb for evermore.

"Friend Balderson, you have been most courteously quiet this long time. Is there no question you would care to ask?"

"You told Dr. Trowbridge you knew the 'Black Master'," Eric replied. "Can you tell us something about him——"

"Ah, *parbleu*, but I can!" de Grandin interrupted. "This afternoon, while the excellent jeweler was turning out my bullets, I repaired to the public library and discovered much of that old villain's life and deeds. Who he was nobody seems to know. As to what he was, there is much fairly accurate conjecture.

"A Turk he was by birth, it is generally believed, and a most unsavory follower of the false Prophet. Even in sinful Stamboul his sins were so great that he was deprived of his tongue by way of punishment. Also, he was subjected to another operation not wholly unknown in Eastern countries. This latter, instead of rendering him docile, seemed to make a veritable demon of him. Never would he permit his crews to take prisoners, even for ransom. Sexless himself, he forbade the presence of women—even drabs from Maracaibo and Panama—aboard his ships, save for one purpose. That was torture. Whenever a ship was captured, he fetched the female prisoners aboard, and after compelling them to witness the slaughter of their men folk, with his own hands he put them to death, often crushing life from their throats with his maimed right hand. Does not his history fit squarely with the things we have observed these last two nights? The accounts declare, 'The time and place of his death are uncertain, but it is thought he died somewhere near the present city of Newark and was buried somewhere in Jersey. A vast treasure disappeared with him, and speculation concerning its hiding-place rivals that of the famous buried hoard of Captain Kidd.'

"Now, it is entirely probable that we might add something of great interest to that chronicle, but I do not think we shall, for——"

Absorbed in the Frenchman's animated narrative, Eric Balderson had moved from his shadowed corner into the zone of light cast by the reading-lamp, and as de Grandin was about to finish, Marian Warner interrupted him with a little cry of incredulous delight. "Eric," she called. "Eric Balderson! Oh, my dear, I've wondered and worried so much about you!"

A moment later she had flown across the room, shedding de Grandin's purple lizardskin slippers as she ran, put both hands on the young man's shoulders, and demanded, "Why did you go away, dear; didn't you know——"

"Marian!" Eric interrupted hoarsely. "I didn't dare ask your father. I was so wretchedly poor, and there seemed no prospect of my ever getting anywhere—you'd been used to everything, and I thought it would be better for us both if I just faded out of the picture. But"—he laughed boyishly—"I'm rich, now, dear—one of the richest men in the country, and——"

"Rich or poor, Eric dear, I love you," the girl interrupted as she slipped both arms about his neck and kissed him on the lips.

Jules de Grandin's arms shot out like the blades of a pair of opening shears. With one hand he grasped Sergeant Costello's arm; the other snatched me by the elbow. "Come away, foolish ones," he hissed. "What have we, who left our loves in Avalon long years ago, to do with such as they? *Pardieu,* to them we are a curse, a pest, an abomination; we do incumber the earth!

"Await me here," he ordered as we concluded our march to the consulting-room. "I go, but I return immediately."

In a moment he came tripping down the stairs, a magnificent glowing ruby, nearly as large as a robin's egg, held daintily between his thumb and forefinger. "For their betrothal ring," he announced proudly. "See, it is the finest in my collection."

"Howly Mither, Dr. de Grandin, sor, are ye a jinny from th' *Arabeen Nights,* to be passin' out jools like that whenever a pair o' young folks gits engaged?" demanded Sergeant Costello, his big blue eyes almost popping from his head in amazement.

"Ah, *mon sergent,*" the little Frenchman turned one of his quick, elfish smiles on the big Irishman, "you have as yet seen nothing. Before you leave this house tonight Friend Trowbridge and I shall fill every pocket of your clothes to overflowing with golden coin from old Spain; but e'er we do so, let us remember it is Christmas."

With the certainty of one following a well-worn path, he marched to the medicine closet, extracted a bottle of peach brandy and three glasses, and filled them to the brim.

"To your very good and long-lasting health, my friend," he pledged, raising his glass aloft. "*Joyeux Noël!*"

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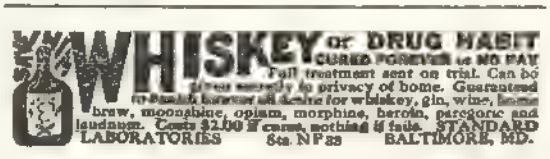
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The Demon of Tlaxpam

(Continued from page 40)

of our race, we were transported to Yucatan, and there sold as slaves, mostly to the owners of the sisal hemp plantations. My mother died on the way—of grief, I think. My father succumbed, soon after our arrival, to the combination of hard work, cruel treatment and little food. Having the endurance of youth, my brother and I were able to keep body and soul together, though life was a constant horror. My chief consolation was derived from the good Padre who came to visit us, and who took quite an interest in me. It was in my talks with and observance of him that I gained a knowledge of priestly ways which has stood me in good stead since that time.

"But to go on. Although I have always been unusually quick-tempered, my brother had this trait to a more marked degree than I. Many times I have seen him fly into a frenzy over a mere trifle. Small wonder then, that he should, one day, let his hatred overmaster his judgment when the overseer struck him with a whip. He seized it and lashed his tormentor across the face, but his triumph was short—his end bloody—for the overseer decapitated him with his machete.

"For me this was the last straw. My sister had undoubtedly been ravished and murdered, my mother had died of grief, my father from cruelty, and now my little brother, the only one left for me to love, had been slain. All this I charged, and still charge, to the rapacity of the Mexican government.

"I was ordered to bury the body of my brother where it lay, unshriven, and mourned only by me. Over his grave, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I took a solemn oath that if ever I should be able to escape from that place alive I would take a thousand Mexican heads to pay the debt. I bided my time, and one day my opportunity came. When I left, I took with me the head of the overseer who had slain my brother.

"My first act on the open road was to rob a traveler of his mule, his pack, and his head. The pack, I found, contained a large store of cheap but gaudy jewelry which I hawked to advantage in the villages through which I passed. Whenever I saw the chance I would take a head, remove the flesh by boiling, and store the skull in my pack.

"Within a month my jewelry had all been sold and my money was exhausted. I obtained employment in the shop of a horseshoer, and it was while there that I conceived and secretly manufactured my little *degollador*, as I call it. It is so designed that when it drops over a man's head, the impact with his shoulders releases the razor-sharp blade, usually severing his head from his body. If the blade strikes a vertebra and sticks, then a sharp pull on the rope completes the job. But to go on with the story.

"I chanced to come here, and found that the place was admirably suited to my purpose. I did not live in the hut at first, but camped on the hillside not far from here. I succeeding in collecting many skulls from travelers riding beneath the cliffs, and of course I left no traces. One day while wandering on the hillside I came upon an opening that excited my curiosity. Seeing that it penetrated quite deeply I made a number of torches with dried grass and explored it. It led me to a small chamber behind the image of St. Anthony, and I found, to my amazement, that the slab which formed the

rear panel of the shrine was, in reality, a door, easily opened from the inside, and swinging on brass hinges which, though corroded, were still serviceable. The drop of blood which you found at the base of the shrine bears me out in this, as I used that door when obtaining Pedro's head while you and José waited at the table for your chicken and *tortillas*.

"Exploring further, I found this room and its connection with the rear of the hut. The two rooms and the tunnels had evidently been used at some forgotten time by the keepers of the shrine, as a place of refuge during Indian attacks.

"That evening I took the head of Father Salvador while he was exploring the hillside for herbs. The next day, when a company of pilgrims came—they had already grown fearful of the neighborhood and came in numbers—I told them I had discovered the body near my camp. They swore he had been murdered by the devil, such being the popular superstition regarding the other deaths because I never left tracks, and it was not difficult for me to persuade them and the authorities who came later that I would be a suitable guardian for the shrine.

"One day I noticed the advertisement of a costumer in a paper from Mexico City which had been wrapped around a bottle of tequila given me by a pilgrim. I took a train down there and purchased three costumes from him like the one I now wear, giving, of course, a false name and address. The costume fitted well with the popular superstition regarding the place, and I felt that it would afford me considerable protection in case I was seen. Is there anything else that puzzles you?"

Leslie considered a moment.

"Yes. There are several things. For one, how does it happen that you can throw that thing with such uncanny accuracy?"

"In the same way that a vaquero

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can throw a riata with equal accuracy. By practise. I practised for weeks before I attempted to use it at all as a substitute for the machete. You are one of the very few live targets I have ever missed." He took a skull from the pyramid and handed it to Leslie. "Here. Roll this across the floor as swiftly as you wish, and let me show you."

Leslie waited for him to pick up the instrument of death and poise it aloft. Then he rolled the skull at the opposite wall. The Anciano hurled the thing with catlike quickness, but it fell, not over the skull, but over the head of the American. With a cackle of diabolical glee, the hermit jerked the rope taut.

11

LESLIE had holstered his revolver when he rolled the skull, hence both his hands were free. As the infernal machine descended over his head he instinctively put up both hands to throw it off, but this was prevented by the Anciano's jerking the rope taut. The keen blade was beneath his chin, almost touching his throat, but the trigger bars had not yet touched his shoulders. Had they done so his death would have been instaneous. Still tugging at the rope, the hermit quickly shortened the distance between them. Then, grasping the ring with one hand, he dropped the rope and suddenly pressed down on the machine from the top with the other. The trigger bars struck Leslie's shoulders, but quick as the hermit had been, the American was again a shade quicker. Shifting his own hold, he had grasped the two bars that moved the blade, using the pressure on the back of his neck to keep it from his throat. The springs were tremendously powerful and he had all he could do to keep the keen blade away, the Anciano meanwhile keeping the thing pressed down on his head and jerking at the ring behind.

The struggle that ensued was the most fearful in Leslie's experience. The Anciano, he found, was a powerful athlete, notwithstanding his previous pretended feebleness. Twice his chin was cut to the bone by the razor-edged blade as the hermit jerked him about. The thing that galled him the most was the fact that he could not fight back. Although his six-shooters were belted about him he dared not let go with either hand to reach for a gun. His sole consolation was that his enemy was in like case so far as his hands were concerned, though a long way from being in such desperate peril.

Struggling intensely, bleeding profusely from the two cuts in his chin, Leslie soon found his strength ebbing at an alarming rate. He lashed out blindly with his feet and sometimes succeeded in kicking the enemy's shins, but the softness of the moccasins rendered this ineffective.

Knowing that the unequal struggle could not last much longer, Leslie at length resolved on a desperate plan. First relaxing, to make it appear that his strength was gone, he suddenly bent double and, at the same time, pushed upward with both hands. The hermit, taken completely by surprize, was first jerked forward, then catapulted over the head of the American. Although the movement jerked the machine from his head, Leslie received a severe cut on his forehead. The blood trickled down in his eyes, half blinding him, so that he could but dimly see the hermit lying on his back where he had fallen. Whipping out his knife, Leslie cut a piece from the riata and pounced on his prostrate foe, who appeared partly stunned from his fall. It was but the work of a moment to turn him over and bind his hands behind him. Another piece, cut from the same riata, served to secure his feet.

"There, damn you!" he snarled, rising unsteadily and wiping the

blood from his eyes. "I guess you won't try any more tricks."

The hermit made no answer, but there came a sound that instantly put Leslie on his guard—the clatter of boots and the jingle of spurs in the passageway through which the Anciano had come. Instantly supicious, Leslie drew both six-shooters and crouched behind the pyramid of skulls, convinced that no one but an enemy could have come from that direction. He lowered both guns with a nervous laugh a moment later, as José stepped through the doorway. Behind him came a dapper *caballero* whom Leslie instantly recognized.

"Hernandez!" he cried in surprize. "How the devil did you get here?"

"Ees ver' simple, *amigo*," Hernandez replied, warmly shaking the proffered hand. "I get desperate an' use the hot iron on that damn' *peón* today. Then he's talk plenty. Ees tal me Tio Luis gave heem the order to get your head, promising heem many blessing een return. He's tal heem that he who cuts a heretic gets eight years' absolution.

"Right away, I smell the mouse, and ride out here weeth two men. José, I find cooking breakfast, an' he's tal me you're in the hut. I go there, but find no one, so return to José. He's say maybe you 'ave gone to look for the trail where you shoot at the devil last night. We go there and find trail ourselves. It leads to a hole in the hillside an' a passageway which we follow to this place. I see you 'ave those devil, all right, but where ees the Anciano? You must get heem also to win those twenty thousand pesos, for both are guilty."

"Fair enough," replied Leslie. "I call you. Take a look at this man's face."

Hernandez bent and turned the Anciano on his back, then straightened up with a cry of amazement.

"Tio Luis! Son of wan gun! You win, *amigo*."

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The Silver Key

(Continued from page 48)

chief found among the forest rocks on the hillside beyond can not be identified as belonging to the missing man.

There is talk of apportioning Randolph Carter's estate among his heirs, but I shall stand firmly against this course because I do not believe he is dead. There are twists of time and space, of vision and reality, which only a dreamer can divine; and from what I know of Carter I think he has merely found a way to traverse these mazes. Whether or not he will ever come back, I can not say. He wanted the lands of dreams he had lost, and yearned for the days of his childhood. Then he found a key, and I somehow believe he was able to use it to strange advantage.

I shall ask him when I see him, for I expect to meet him shortly in a certain dream-city we both used to haunt. It is rumored in Ulthar, beyond the River Skai, that a new king reigns on the opal throne of Ilek-Vad, that fabulous town of turrets atop the hollow cliffs of glass overlooking the twilight sea wherein the bearded and finny Gnorri build their singular labyrinths, and I believe I know how to interpret this rumor. Certainly, I look forward impatiently to the sight of that great silver key, for in its cryptical arabesques there may stand symbolized all the aims and mysteries of a blindly impersonal cosmos.

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She beamed at her husband, delighted to see how surprised—and pleased—he was.

And I was astonished, too. Quite casually she had gone to the piano, sat down—and played! Played beautifully—though I had never seen her touch a piano before. Neither of us could conceal our curiosity.

"How did you ever do it?" her husband asked. "When did you find time to practice?"

"And who is your teacher?" I added.

"Wait, wait!" she laughed. "One question at a time. I have no teacher, that is, no private teacher, and I do my practicing between dishes."

"No teacher."

"No—I learned to play the piano an entirely *new* way—*without* a teacher. You see, all my life I wanted to play some musical instrument. I thought I'd never learn how to play, though—for I haven't much time to spare, and I thought it would take long hours of hard work. And I thought it would be expensive, too."

"Well, it *is* hard work, and it is expensive," I said. "Why, I have a sister . . ."

"I know," she laughed, "but *I* learned to play the piano through the new simplified method. Some time ago I saw an announcement of the U. S. School of Music. It told how a young man had learned to play the piano during his spare time without a teacher. I found that thousands of others had learned to play their favorite musical instruments in this same delightful, easy way, and so I decided to enroll for a course in piano playing."

"But you didn't tell me anything about it," Jim said.

"Well, you see, that was my big surprise. Ever since I received my first lesson I've been practicing by myself—during the day while you've been away at business. I turned my spare moments between housekeeping and shopping into something pleasant and profitable."

"If you planned to surprise me—you've certainly succeeded," said Jim.

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